THE ULTIMATE ACADEMY

2020-2021 YEARBOOK

CARIZMA

HEAD & SOCIAL MEDIA

THEAORDELIA

FLORA

HEAD & LAYOUT

FLORAFICATION

FLORA.FICATION

ZACH

GRAPHICS

RABBLERAUSERS

CAPY

ART

CAPYCADO

ANIMERCOM

WRITING

SRANIMERCOM

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DODO

FINANCE

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SHIPPING

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Thank you to Jade, who helped out as a shipping and finance intern early-on!

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY
IBUKI

New Buginnings

Fox

The stairwells at Hope's Peak stretched all the way from the top floor to the basement. No student ever really needed to go that far down, though, unless they were a troublemaker being forced to help out the janitor as punishment. There was nothing but storage and other unused rooms down there.

Which made it a perfect hiding spot for Toko Fukawa. Whenever she needed a quiet place to write, or hide, or she just wanted peace — which was often — sitting underneath the bottom of the stairs was like a sanctuary. A spot of slanted shade hidden in an otherwise well-lit area. Though she'd flinch at the stomping and shouting going on the tiles up above her, it was her one safe space in this nerve-wracking institution. A spot of calm amidst a sea of voices and sweat.

It was so safe in fact that, one day, she mustered up the courage to bring her only friend there.

Toko never stayed in class to eat lunch — too many people, too noisy. She'd slip away and spend it under the stairs, slowly chewing on some snack bar or chips as she scribbled away in her notebook. This time, though, she pulled something extra from her backpack: a small white beetle.

One would think it sad that the writer's only friend was a stink bug, and yeah, it kinda was. But as soon as she held the little critter in her hands, Toko was happy. "S-s-sorry for the bumpy ride, Kameko..." she said to it, gently stroking its shell. The bug chittered and crawled over her palm. "I know! It's so nice down here, isn't it...? N-no loud jocks, no one sneering at you and gossiping behind their hands..." Among other belittling acts, she thought bitterly. But she couldn't be mad long with her Kameko peeking up at her with what she assumed was affection.

Sure, their combined stench made the area basically uninhabitable to anyone else, but to Toko, that just made it even better. Just a place for her and her one true friend to relax. No one else.

"Halyomorpha halys!"

"GAH!" Toko jumped when a new voice called out and a shadow loomed overhead. Leaning on the railing above, a tanned and burly guy who looked like he'd never seen a comb in his life beamed down at them. "Wh-wh-what are you doing here?!" she spat. "And what'd you just call us?!" It wouldn't be the first time someone was a jerk to her, but she certainly wasn't going to take it in her domain.

"Halymorpha halys," he repeated, pointing at her friend. "Name for

stink bug." Beyond bug nomenclature, he spoke like Toko expected a typical meathead to. "Gonta smell!"

"You said it, not me..." she retorted with a sneer. Like she was one to talk.

"Huh? No, no, Gonta smell bug and follow!" He descended the rest of the way and eyed them — Kameko in particular. "Did not think someone else catch first..."

Toko's mouth gaped as if he'd just insulted them. "Catch?" she repeated, offense in her tone as she pulled the beetle close to her chest. "I brought her here. She's my friend! My Friendsect! A-and if you try to lay a hand on her..."

The newcomer raised his hands protectively. "A-ah! Gonta understand! Gonta gentleman. Will not touch. But Gonta wonder why you two down here...? Lunch upstairs!"

"...Hmph." Toko turned her focus back to her beetle, finding comfort in the way it glanced up at her. "B-because they don't want us around."

Gonta's eyes went wide behind his spectacles. "But why? No one who like bugs is bad person!"

"...Your standards for morality are depressingly low."

Gonta tilted his head, lost. "Gonta sorry... not know what you mean. But why you not welcome?"

Toko groaned. The last thing she wanted to do was explain where she stood in the social hierarchy. "I-I can't imagine someone like you would understand... more muscles than sense, and an IQ lower than room temperature." Judging from his blank expression, her jabs weren't hitting home. She groaned. "So just forget about it!"

For a moment Toko hoped he'd take the hint and leave the two to their lonely solidarity... but, apparently, he was too thick to process even that. Instead of dubbing her a lost cause like everyone else, he just scratched his chin before pointing at her bug. "Maybe she explain?"

"...Huh?" Even Toko in her infinite (biting) wit was lost, her brow furrowing.

The tall man kneeled and held out his hands palm up. "Hello, friend! Come talk?"

Toko would've been weirded out... if it hadn't worked. The bug turned to face the newcomer before suddenly leaping, buzzing across the gap to his hands. "K-Kameko!" Toko cried out. Curse her beetle's sudden but inevitable betrayal.

The writer was left alone briefly as the boy and bug talked quietly to each other. Somehow, it seemed they were actually conversing. Gonta nodded and hummed in response to chitters and clicks. "Mmm... oh! Mhm. Hmm... Gonta have idea."

Kameko buzzed right back over, and Toko clasped her hands around

her like she was a precious jewel. "Gonta collect many bug," the gentle giant explained while she fawned over her pet. "Keep them safe. Kameko want to see! Kameko want you to see, too."

Toko shot him a look. "Wh-what, you think that just because I'm friends with a stink bug that means I want to hang out with just any insect?!"

"N-no!" Gonta protested. "Gonta just think maybe you find friend for Kameko in his collection..."

Toko's heart fell through the floor. Her mind blared a million reasons why that was a terrible idea. "Wh-wha... no! Unacceptable! What if she finds a new buddy and realizes she doesn't need me anymore?! W-who do you think you are, you Friendsect homewrecker?!"

Still on the defensive, Gonta held his hands up. "Gonta think Toko shouldn't worry! Can have more than one friend. And Kameko trust you... so you should trust her."

"...More than one friend?" she echoed. It was common sense, but it was almost alien to someone as lonely as Toko. "B-but... then I'd have to be the third wheel carting her back and forth to your hive!"

Once more, Gonta seemed lost. "But Kameko said she want to go for *you*, not her."

"...Huh?" Toko glanced down at the bug in her hands like she was up to something. The beetle chittered innocently. "I don't want to spend time around any other bugs! And that'd mean I'd have to spend time with..."

She shot a glance over to their guest... and then paused, eyes widening in realization. This had been the longest talk she'd had with someone since... forever. And while Gonta was hardly going to give her an intelligent conversation... it was admittedly kind of nice to chat with someone who'd actually respond. Just thinking about following him anywhere made her apprehensive, but perhaps it could lead to... friendship? As Kameko clicked encouragingly in her hands, Toko finally figured out what she'd meant.

Still, it'd be a massive leap outside her comfort zone — but if her Friendsect suggested it, she'd be doing her friend a disservice by ignoring the opportunity. Judging from her estimates, lunch was only half over. While she and Kameko could continue to spend it lurking in the shadows...well, they could do that any other day.

"I've... ch-changed my mind," Toko finally murmured. "I gu-guess we'll go see this... urrrgh... this *collection*." She was already regretting this.

She was just waiting for him to reveal it was a joke or change *his* mind. Instead, he just smiled at her and motioned for her to stand. "Okay, follow me! Oh, and my name Gonta."

Her eyes narrowed. "No, really? N-never would've guessed..."

— — — — —

Toko's skin hadn't stopped crawling since she'd entered the side room. The school allowed Gonta to keep some of his finds in an unused class and he did, indeed, collect many a bug. The walls were full of glass cases and the nonstop hum of beating wings. With no windows to let any light in, she felt like she was trapped in a spider's web.

She was alone in that, though. Gonta seemed in his element, grinning and humming as butterflies roosted on his massive fingers. Kameko crawled about on one of the desks, happily scurrying with a bunch of other little beetles Gonta had determined would get along with her. Like always, Toko felt out of place.

Until one of the butterflies fluttered off of Gonta and landed on her glasses.

She resisted the urge to yelp as large blue wings flapped right in front of her eye. But once that initial panic wore off... she saw the creature was beautiful, even close up. It's feather-light touch felt like a small reminder that she did, in fact, exist.

Gonta looked over and laughed. "See? Bugs friend! Now you have two friend."

But as quickly as it arrived, it flew off just as suddenly when the lunch bell rang and left her alone again. Gonta sighed and started directing his bugs back into their cases. "I think they like having visitor. If you want... you can see again tomorrow?"

Toko huffed, scooping a cheerful Kameko back up. She might be better off without a meathead caveman of a friend. ...Then again, it might be nice to actually spend lunch with another person. Even if that person was crawling in ants and flies.

Toko bit at her thumb, a nervous habit of hers. She was taking her good time to respond, and even Gonta was starting to feel like he'd asked the wrong question. Finally, she spoke again. "...Y-Yeah, sure. Tomorrow."

Kameko's leg patted her finger, as if approving her decision. The small smile Gonta sent her made her think that maybe she hadn't just made the worst decision of her life. It wouldn't be long before she had three friend.

E
F P
T O Z

The Endless Beauty of Our World

Eisleira

"No matter where you are, you'll always find beauty somewhere. I can assure you." O, dear adventurer, aren't you wise? And you did. You did find beauty. *Everywhere*. Your eyes wandered. *Everywhere*. And you have seen so much. *Anywhere in the whole world.* Not enough, you would say. And I would agree. Everyone would. But they are here. In front of you. Waiting for you. Waiting for your stories. Hoping to see. To see a glimpse of the beauty you talk so much about. *To see through your eyes.*

"The world is rich in beauty." O, dear adventurer, a little euphemism, don't you think? And you sat down. Your classmates joined you. And you smiled. Did you see? *Beautiful*. Did you even see your smile? *Beautiful*. Your smile was *beautiful*. The view was *you*. Sitting in a garden. Your classmates; with you. They were so interested in your stories. In the tales of your journeys. In the tales of the world. And you had so much to tell; they wanted to hear it all. And you? *You were happy to oblige*.

Today, you were with two people. A man and a woman. O, dear adventurer, you knew the woman very well as she was always here to listen to your stories. She was as magnificent as the world itself. *"Come on, lover boy! I know I'm beautiful but come on, less compliments, more stories! Go on, I'm listening."* And that would be the truth. Even if she loved answering with sass. She was sincere. And you felt grateful for that. And you smiled. Again, boy. You smiled.

And you turned your head towards the man. O, dear adventurer, wasn't he a rare guest? Yes. He was. But when he could be here, he would. He is one of these people who appreciates the beauty in front of them. A fine man, you would say. A man of culture, indeed. You found him enjoying disguises. Sometimes you even saw him in one. *"Do I have something on my face, hm?"* He was interested. You saw it. And you took pleasure in talking with him. And he was telling you what he knew. He knew so much. And you both could go on and on. With no one to stop you. Again, boy. You smiled.

And the time has come, dear adventurer. To tell. To narrate. To go on and on. As your classmates listened to you, *you couldn't help yourself*. And you smiled. And you didn't even think about the time. You could show and tell them about the endless beauty of our world. But you seem to forget. You could see it everywhere. You searched for it everywhere. But the true charm here was your own smile, boy — *so bright*.

Different, But The Same

Carizma

Chisa waited for everyone to settle down before beginning class. "We will be continuing with our heritage presentations today! First up, we have Korekiyo, Celeste, Angie, and Sonia."

Sonia carried her computer to the front and began to hook it up to the projector so they could show the presentation they made. The opening slide popped up on the board in front of the class, showing a picture of the four of them smiling together. They had aptly named their presentation, *"Different, but the Same"* and Angie had used her tablet to doodle on the various slides to give it some "character" as she would say.

Celeste took a step forward and said in a monotonous voice, "I will be presenting Angie's heritage."

Sonia went to the next slide and pictures of Angie as a small child were spread across the screen. The slide after that was a single picture of Angie standing on a mountain in a beautiful dress with the sun shining behind her like a halo.

"Angie grew up on a quite small island in the middle of the ocean. It used to be immense, but unfortunately as time went on natural causes made it smaller. This island is also the home of Angie's god, Atua. It is there that she came upon that she is an oracle for her god and can receive messages from Atua. She and the rest of the island believed this to be true and as he is their god, they did not dare to go against the word of Atua, or Angie as his voice of reason.

"The island itself, as I said, is small, but it is very lucious. It is covered with beautiful nature that Angie says transformed her soul. She has also been attacked by some of the greenery on the island, heh-heh. So who is to say if they are even plants at all? After graduating Angie would like to go back to her island and to her people and share the grand knowledge she learned here from us and from Atua."

Everyone clapped as Celeste stepped back, and Angie moved forward. "Thank you so much, Celeste, for treating me, my people, and Atua with respect. Now, I will be presenting Princess Sonia's background and upbringing."

As with the presentation of Angie's heritage, the slide switched to show a slew of pictures of Sonia as a child and growing up throughout the years. It then switched to a single photo of Sonia standing on the balcony of her castle with her parents in front of all the people of her country.

"Sonia grew up in a small, but beautiful, kingdom called Novoselic. It is over in Europe. Sonia's family has run the country for a very long time,

and when Sonia graduates from here, she will be returning to her home country to take the crown and become the new queen!

"Sonia does wish to marry someday, but in order to do so, she and her betrothed have to each catch the rare and illustrious Makango. As Sonia is royalty, they will have to catch the Golden Makango! Though, as the soon to be ruler, Sonia plans to change these traditions. The ecosystem in Novoselic is thriving, but Sonia believes more can be done to make the country and the people healthier and happier. Atua stands behind that decision and will help in any way he can. Personally, I can't wait to see Princess Sonia on her throne and to visit her beautiful kingdom and to meet her people as I hope she feels the same about myself and my island."

As Angie stepped back, Kazuichi raised his hand. Chisa gestured to him to ask them his question. "Um, what exactly is a Golden Makango and how does one catch one?"

His face turned beat red as Sonia giggled. Angie answered, "That is a secret that is only shared with the couple as they are about to enter the forest. It is only a hint as the point of catching one is to prove your love for the one you want to marry."

"Thank you very much, Angie, for speaking about my country so eloquently. I will now tell you about Korekiyo and where he comes from!"

Sonia stayed by the desk as she clicked to the next slide. It showed many pictures of Korekiyo and his sister, most of which had been taken in different hospital rooms with his sister lying in the bed. For a lot of the class, this was the first time that they saw Korekiyo's whole face as he normally chose to keep it covered. She switched slides again, revealing a picture of Korekiyo and his sister in the hospital smiling.

"I believe Korekiyo is the most interesting one of our group as he says that his heritage is the whole world. As someone who focuses on anthropology, that makes a lot of sense. Anthropology is, of course, the study of what makes us human. Korekiyo has traveled all over the world and stayed in numerous villages to learn of their cultures and customs. He then introduces those customs into his daily life and practices.

"Korekiyo has traveled to over twenty countries and plans to visit five more this summer. I truly admire Korekiyo for his studious efforts and constant yearn for learning. I believe we can all take a page from Korekiyo and learn to appreciate the world and the way others do things a bit more. We are all human at the end of the day. The world is our home, and we are all neighbors. Why should we not learn each other's customs and cultures to better ourselves, our lives, and the lives of those around us?"

Korekiyo took a step forward and gave a small bow to Sonia. "Thank you for seeing the world through my eyes. That is all I could ask. Now finally, I will be presenting Celeste's story."

He glanced at her as Sonia changed the slide. There were no pictures of her as a child as there had been for the others. Instead, it showed just one picture of her making a dress shortly before coming to the school.

"Celestia's history is very *interesting* as she comes from a very historic background. Her father is a member of French nobility and her mother happens to be a German musician with her family. This led Celestia to developing an accent from a variety of countries, which is why you may hear her slip in and out of various accents. Having travelled across Europe with her family, it is no surprise that Celestia holds a high esteem for fashion.

"This is what led her to making her very own lolita clothing line that we see her wear every day. She is an incredible designer and with the research and experiences of her background, it is clear that she is something special in the fashion world. After she graduates, she wants to return to her family in Europe and begin developing a new and better line of clothing to show the world."

The class clapped politely but it fell silent as Celeste stared at Korekiyo. Head tilted, Kiyo stared back at her, "Is something wrong, *Celestia*?"

Celeste shook her head and snapped herself out of it. "No, nothing is wrong, Kiyo. Thank you."

Sonia looked between the two and cleared her throat. "Well, that concludes our presentation. Does anyone have any questions?"

Fuyuhiko raised his hand from the back of the class. "Celeste, did you come here straight from Europe, or did you live in Japan for a while before coming to this school?"

Celeste faltered once again as she stared at Fuyuhiko for a second like she didn't hear him. She blinked. "I came straight from Europe with my parents; why?"

"You just look like someone I've seen before. Never mind."

Sonia lifted her head. "Yes?"

"No, that's not — Whatever."

Sonia frowned slightly as she unhooked her computer from the system.

"Are there any other questions?" Chisa stood up and began moving in front of the class as the group shuffled closer together.

The room stayed silent.

"Alright, well, thank you again to Celeste, Angie, Korekiyo, and Sonia for that incredibly informative presentation. It is clear the four of you bonded tremendously over this project and it is great for me to see the lines between the classes blurring in some ways."

The group nodded with polite smiles and made their way back to their seats. Chisa pulled out her list of groups. "I do believe we have time for one more presentation today. How about... ?"

Photographs

Kimium {Collab with SorrelArtz}

Nagito woke to knocking. Groggily, Nagito slammed his hand on the nightstand. Nagito fumbled until he found his phone. Panic seized his brain.

"Na-gi-to!" Hajime's voice came from the hallway.

"Hajime!?" Nagito screeched as he ripped the blankets messily off.

"About time! " Hajime grumbled. "I was close to yanking you out of bed."

"Don't you DARE!" Nagito yelped. "Why are you even here?"

"Your mother saw me by the gates so she invited me in. Which, you're welcome. Without me would you have even woken up?"

"Shut it. Give me a minute." Nagito stumbled out of bed and towards his closet. The wooden doors creaked as he flung them open. He yanked the uniform off his hanger and swiftly shut the door.

"Na-gi-to, you need to hurry up!"

"I am!" Nagito groaned. "Give me a minute."

Slipping his arms through the sleeves, Nagito hastily buttoned up his white shirt. hands smoothing the fabric. His fingers caught on the buttons, which he was fairly certain weren't buttoned in the right holes. "I just need to put my tie on."

"Oh, thank goodness. If I had to wait a minute longer, I'd die of old age."

Grabbing his red tie, Nagito strode towards his full-length mirror, and slammed his foot against the wood of the desk. First attempt was crooked. Nagito tugged at the tie and his gaze slid to the photos on the wall.

The frames were expensive, the photo's matte finish preventing glaring. In each photo were professional stills of Nagito and his parents in formal clothing and stiff postures.

The next set of photos were Polaroids, fastened by a heavy tweed string, which curved gently along Nagito's wall. The closest photo was Hinata, Nanami, and him squished together, attempting to hold up crepes. Whipped cream rested on Hinata's nose and chocolate sauce smeared Nanami's cheek.

The following photo was him and Sonia in Halloween costumes. Next, the sports festival with Tanaka and Tsumiki passed out on the ground.

"I'll be surprised if a talking-to is the only thing Yukizome-sensei gives us!"

"Sorry, I'm ready!" Nagito grabbed his book bag and opened the shoji door.

"Your tie is crooked," Hajime informed as he took a step back.

"Sorry, I was in a rush. I can't imagine why I felt pressure." Hajime rolled his eyes and straightened Nagito's tie. "Aw, thanks Hajime," Nagito cooed. "I cannot imagine where I'd be without you!"

"Late and in trouble with both the school and your parents," Hajime promptly replied. "You're lucky I'm here."

"Indeed I am! Now, let's go!"

He pushed past Hajime. Went down the stairs, put his shoes on, and opened the door. Stepping outside, Nagito began to run, Hajime in tow.

Teambuilding Exercise

Majorinconvenience

Kokichi never expected his boring high school life to be easy. As a self-proclaimed honorary troublemaker, he makes sure not to make it so. The school just wouldn't survive without his constant pranks and stunts. However, this day defied all of his expectations; not to mention he isn't even the one to blame this time.

"What now, Sonia? Gonna live a forest life? I'm so fucking done with you idiots."

"Fuyuhiko! Cease this panic and watch your profanity. We are going to be ok— *ah*!"

With her hair messy and the expensive tracksuit covered in dirt, Sonia still manages to trip pretty gracefully like the princess she is. Kokichi hears a loud splash, followed by the rustle of the wild grass.

"God damn it all to hell!" The girl's desperate voice rings across the trees and bushes. It emphasizes just how lonely and lost they are in this, undeniably, hell of a place.

Well, it doesn't *look* like hell, at least. Countless cedars and cypresses surround them, smelling of yesterday's rain and today's sun. The tall grass gently tickles their feet like a bunch of mischievous children nagging them to play together. However, even in such a magical place, all Kokichi does is bite down the annoying anxiety that's tickling his throat and stomach, trying to maintain a carefree attitude in front of his stressed-out teammates. Thinking about how different things would be if he'd just joined someone else.

Screw this "Survival training". Seriously. If that third-year Enoshima really is the one behind this idea, he'll make sure to have a talk with her later.

He watches Fuyuhiko offer Sonia a helping hand and stifles a giggle when the fallen girl easily gets up on her own with a forced smile. Her usually spotless face is now tainted by mud; Kokichi would love to laugh if his own appearance was any better.

"This is what you get for not reading the map right." Kuzuryu awkwardly withdraws his hand and hides it in the pocket of his dirty pants.

The princess shoots Fuyuhiko an upset look and bites her lip, thinking of a response; Kokichi can see how guilty she feels. "I *am* good with maps, I swear!" she breathes out. "I just confused the kanji for 'South', and—

"It was '*West*'. How the hell do you confuse West and South?!"

Jeez. This guy is going to make Sonia panic. "Are all yakuza leaders this hysterical?" Kokichi mutters to himself before awarding Fuyuhiko with a bitter smirk. "Oh? So you know where West and South are? How weird for a guy who

immediately declined to even glance at the map when we received it!"

The look he gets in response is worth putting on a horror movie poster. "If you say one more word, I will call my people on you!"

"How *scaaary*! But will your people be good with maps if their leader isn't?"

Sonia jumps in-between them, her eyes glowing with irritation. "You are not helping at all! Speaking of your people, Fuyuhiko, would it trouble you to actually call them and ask them to find us?"

"I *could* contact my people if my phone didn't fall in that stupid swamp!" huffs the yakuza leader, fixing his half-torn tie. "Can't you call your security?"

"Unfortunately, I also do not possess my phone."

Disappointed, they wobble further with no direction in mind, stepping over the fallen trees and prickly bushes. Kokichi feels more and more dreadful each minute, the fear scratching his body with its icy claws. They will find a way out soon, right? They won't have to sleep on the cold ground or eat leaves all day like pandas or hide from wild animals and gigantic bugs, will they?

"Hey, Kokichi?" Sonia clumsily jumps over another thick branch to get closer to him, muffling his panicking thoughts. "Your phone must be working, correct? Could you contact your people?"

Uh oh. Kokichi's body tenses up.

"Do you still believe he has anyone?" Fuyuhiko's mocking laugh rings from the distance.

"Yes! Ten million members of a secret organization, was it?"

"Ten *thousand*, actually," Kokichi corrects.

"Still great! That many people can definitely find us here!"

Sonia is right. Ten thousand people would be a great help in such an unfortunate situation. However, Kokichi has only ten of them, who are probably having fun in their secret hangout spot behind the old playground right now. His dear little family, DICE.

Would he call and ask them for help? Would he let them risk their well-being and identities for his sake? *No way Jose!* Kokichi would hate to put them in danger just because he's stuck with upperclassmen during this stupid "Survival Training" his school had the audacity to host.

Still, he can't just say no. It would immediately fuel Fuyuhiko's pride. With a subtle sigh, Kokichi pulls out his phone and checks the chats; lucky for him, none of them can load.

"Aw man! No signal," he whines, scrolling through the small gallery of his subordinates' faces. "How unfortunate." As his finger scrolls even further, Kokichi reaches the few chats he had with his classmates, and a sudden idea crosses his mind. He opens one of them with a big bumblebee as its profile picture, then types the text message.

"wanna play hide-and-seek?? im hiding somewhere in the forest!"

Of course, it doesn't come through, but he still has a tiny spark of hope

warming up his freezing worried heart. "I sent the text. Hopefully, we'll get help once I catch the signal!" His proud announcement is met with Sonia's delighted smile. He hears Fuyuhiko snort in the distance but doesn't bother to come up with a witty comeback.

In silence, they continue walking. Kokichi keeps staring at the sky out of boredom, and the more he looks at it, the more he feels like the sun is walking with them. Will it set soon? They've been in this forest for hours, even though the task they were given was supposed to take no more than thirty minutes.

They were ordered to find the treasure using the map and the signs left on the trees. Sadly, they only noticed something was wrong once the signs disappeared. None of them seemed to be suitable for this kind of mission, but they didn't have any choice. Their trio was like those petty leftovers in the fridge after a huge party — they didn't belong to any particular clique and had to stick together, even though they all knew they had nothing in common.

And this is what having nothing in common does to a team.

Fuyuhiko's tired groan makes Kokichi wince and glance at his companions. He's never seen them likes this before. Their pace gets slower; sometimes Kokichi feels like the ground moves under him and makes him stagger, and he notices that his teammates walk the same way.

Suddenly, it clicks in his head. In DICE, they never go without a rest or a tea break since it significantly improves their productivity. This team could use a productivity boost, too. Kokichi looks around and spots a fallen tree nearby. Although it doesn't seem comfortable, he figures it's better than resting on the ground. "Hey, let's sit down for a bit?" he smiles nonchalantly and points at the tree. "There's a cozy park bench over there!"

He expects Sonia to express her concerns for her suit or Fuyuhiko to protest, but, to his surprise, both turn around and nod drowsily. Their energy levels must be even lower than Kokichi expected... And what's worse, it spreads to him like a virus, making his shoulders drop and his knees buckle.

Would he be so weak if DICE were here?

They make it to the fallen tree and sit down, pressing each other's bodies closer awkwardly. Kokichi's feet begin to hurt as soon as he lifts them above the ground, and he hears Sonia whine next to him in solidarity.

"I always wanted to admire the beauty of Japanese forests, but I never wished to do it for so long," she admits. "I... sincerely apologize for the trouble I've caused."

Fuyuhiko sighs loudly behind her. "Don't. You had good intentions." Then adds, before she can protest, "You're a foreigner, Sonia. It's okay to make mistakes like this."

It's heartwarming to hear the rude yakuza leader talk to her so nicely. Eager to cheer her up even more, Kokichi pats her on the shoulder and smiles wider. "Besides, we're a team. All of us were supposed to pay attention. It's mean to hog all the blame, you know!"

The princess cocks her head lightly. "You may be right... I just really wanted to help. You see, I've been in a similar situation before, so I promised myself to keep us safe this time... Yet failed once again."

"A similar situation?" Fuyuhiko hums. "What do you mean?"

"I got lost in the palace gardens when I was little! Everyone got so worried and went to look for me everywhere. It was not as dangerous as being lost in the forest, but I got scared due to my young age, therefore I couldn't do much." She pauses, her voice dropping low. "I miss them... my people. My family and citizens. They would rescue me in a heartbeat if they were here. And I would be happy to spend time with them again, too."

"I know that feeling," Fuyuhiko fidgets on his end and fixes his tie again. "I have quite a lot of underlings, but they're all like a real family to me. Every single person. Especially... my childhood friend."

Kokichi winces. He can also relate to that... Except he only has ten loyal subordinates who don't do anything but have fun and cause trouble with him.

"You're close to all of your underlings? How come?" gasps Sonia. "I mean, I also know quite a lot of servants and citizens in my country, but I could never imagine being so close to everyone..."

A snort reaches Kokichi's ears, "That's because you control the whole country, duh. I just take care of the ones in my clan."

"Still, a good leader should be close to as many people as possible." Having said that, Sonia turns to the other boy and nods, prompting him to join in. "Don't you agree, Kokichi? You also have a large organization, after all."

Kokichi barely keeps himself from averting his eyes and hiding his face in his favorite checkered scarf. He'd love to gush honestly about his organization, about how close they are, every good memory he has of them, but... He forces out a giggle, "Totes! If you don't know your people, how can you call them yours? I'm good friends with all of my ten thousand subordinates!"

Two pairs of eyes immediately lock onto him, glowing with surprise and subtle disbelief. "How is that possible?" Fuyuhiko snorts doubtfully.

Kokichi crosses his legs to relax. "Easy-peasy. We have a lot of, uh..." He pauses for a second, remembering the smart-sounding word to seem serious. *"Teambuilding exercises.* Like fun games and tea breaks! We go places together and have lots of meetings, too."

"All ten thousand of you?" Sonia covers her mouth with her dirty hand as she gasps.

"Of course not! I've divided my organization in sections for meetings and stuff. Still, there are plenty of times when I combine groups or when we all meet in one place." Satisfied with how confident he sounded, Kokichi rolls his eyes arrogantly. "I know it seems complicated, but that's operating a big organization for ya!"

That was a close one.

Fuyuhiko chews on his lip thoughtfully. "That actually sounds like... a nice

idea. Teambuilding, huh." He huffs. "Dammit, we've been so caught up in work lately that I don't remember the last time we had tea together."

"Ah, it would be delightful to have a tea party with my servants!" Sonia follows up. "This is such good advice, Kokichi. As a leader, I find it very valuable."

Kokichi feels his cheeks burn and barely manages to hide behind a confident smirk. "Anytime!" he snickers, crossing his hands behind his head and almost falling on his back. "We're all leaders, after all!"

...Wait a moment.

"Kokichi? Kokichi! Gonta found you!"

The trio winces as they hear the familiar loud voice nearby, accompanied by the crunching of the branches. A tall silhouette appears before their tired eyes and gives them such a bright smile that Kokichi has to squint his eyes for a second.

Wow. Kokichi wonders if the message got sent faster than he expected or if his classmate is this good with everything that involves nature. "Gonta! There you are!" he trills, jumping from the fallen tree as a greeting; Sonia and Fuyuhiko follow suit. "Took you long enough. We got *sooo* bored already!"

"Really?! Gonta is so sorry!" Gonta gasps.

Fuyuhiko groans as his dirty hands reach up to fix his wrinkled tie. "That was a lie, duh. I'd say you found us fast."

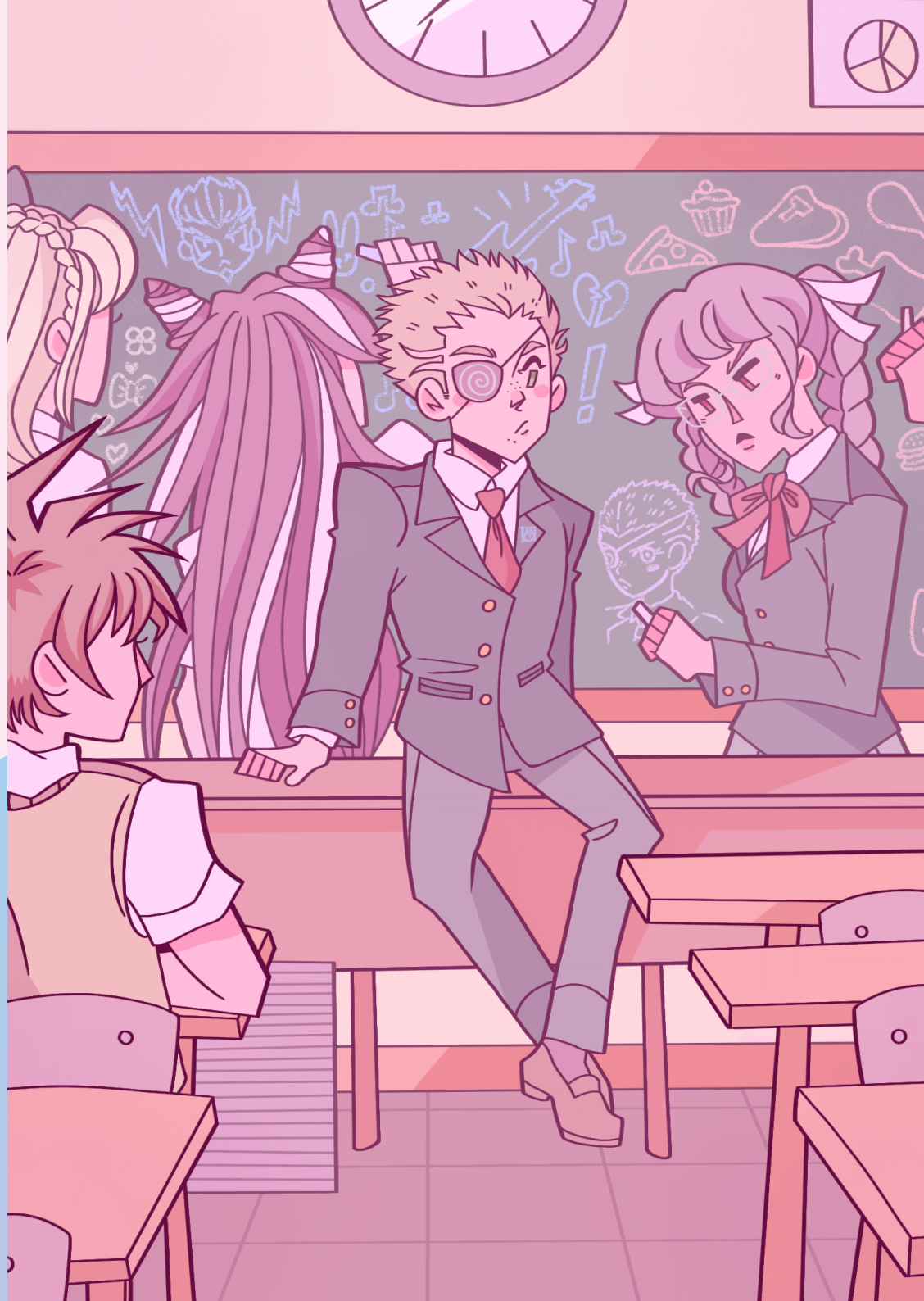
"Yes, I express my sincerest gratitude to you, Gonta!" Sonia croons. "Going into the forest on your own just to rescue us... You're such a gentleman!"

Gonta's cheeks turn beet-red as he tries to hide his embarrassment. Kokichi swallows back a cheeky laugh once he sees Gonta mumbling frantically. "I-it's truly nothing! Gonta just wanted to play with Kokichi!" The bigger boy gestures to the others to follow him, and they obediently line up behind his back like ducklings. "Let's go home now. Others are worried!"

They exchange a few lazy jokes and comments, but eventually, the tired, one-sided conversations die out, and the leaders go on in silence, just stomping on the branches and rocks and breathing in the fresh forest air. For some reason — or, perhaps, as a result of Gonta's confidence — walking around doesn't feel scary at all now, almost as if they're doing it willingly to find peace of mind together.

Well, they may have found it already. Kokichi can't spot even a glimpse of the tension from earlier among them. He keeps eyeing Fuyuhiko and Sonia, only to find relieved smiles on their weary faces. They still don't talk, focusing on the road and Gonta's ramblings about the insects he found on the way; because of that, strangely enough, Kokichi finds himself eager to find a new remote place and have another conversation with his teammates. Share more tips and stories, find out more about Sonia's servants and Fuyuhiko's underlings, gush about DICE without revealing the truth, come up with more crazy adventures they could've gone through... Yes, they have a lot to discuss.

They're all leaders, after all.



A Chef's Tasting

Eisleira

A faint smell escaped the kitchen,
"Could it be something sweet?"
Certainly not a donut, little girl.

The chef was already working,
Dear, he was so proud of it,
A little token from his mother — *a family recipe.*

He invited four ladies to taste his new masterpiece,
And he couldn't wait for them to try it,
I hope you're watching me, Mom.

A finishing touch, and it's done!
A dessert worthy of the Olympus' gods,
And here he was, bringing the plates with him.

What mattered was the satisfaction on the ladies' faces,
After all, that was a part of his job, right?
Seeing people leave his restaurant with a smile.

As Celeste took her first bite, following by Hina,
Chiaki turned to give Junko a plate,
And he waited — praying.

"Your cooking skills are still divine, Teruteru," said Celeste.
And the ladies said the same,
And he didn't know — *his smile was so touching.*

His happiness was showing — he was glowing,
For the first time, there were no jokes,
As he was serious about this little heirloom.

As the day drew to a close, he returned home,
A little package in hand. He called for his mother,
And he remembered the best gift he could have — *his mom's smile.*

Another Day in Detention

TheMaybellTree

"Oi, dickwad!" Taka cringed. "Whatcha doing in detention, huh? Huh?" A short girl — Hiyoko? — tossed another pebble at Taka's head. It bounced uselessly off his skull and onto the ground. "Answer the cowtits!"

The girl harassing Taka — Miu Iruma, he believed — guffawed and turned to the other girl, shouting profanities that Taka didn't dare to repeat, even in his thoughts.

As those profane and belligerent girls argued on his left side, and as his blood brother and the wannabe rockstar of his class argued on his right, Taka slowly sunk his head into his hands. *Where is the teacher?!*

Kiyotaka Ishimaru wasn't one for detention. He was typically the one handing out detention for offenses that ranged from mere misdemeanors to felonies in the school sphere. PDA to assault, running in the halls to ditching... As the hall monitor, it was his duty to ensure that these troublemakers received their due punishment! Detention, much like prison, was a method of rehabilitation. Or it was supposed to be.

Now here he sat, one with the delinquents — a sham! All for one tiny misstep...

Five minutes on the dot after lunchtime was when he saw it. Two younger students — first-years — holding hands. *PDA!* Readying his notepad and pen, Taka weaved and glided through students as he approached the couple. The couple's footsteps quickened as if they knew they were being followed. In response, Taka's feet began to unconsciously speed up.

The couple continued walking fast, speed walking at a pace unseen ever before! His eyes only on the target, his brain ceased control of his mobility. Taka pushed through the crowd, his arms moving back and forth like he was in an Olympic marathon.

The two underclassmen looked over their shoulders and squeaked. They crouched on the floor as they prepared for him to bulldoze over them. Taka stopped, writing on his notepad and breathing as though nothing had happened. "Ha! I finally caught you! For PDA, you are both due for detention tomorrow afternoon, right after the last bell." He tapped at their still joined hands. "Holding hands during school hours is not allowed."

The two girls raised their eyebrows and slyly looked at each other. The taller one reached forward and yanked the slip from his hand. The other, shorter and fiercer, jutted her hip out, pointing at the hallway behind Taka.

Students he had haphazardly passed in his pursuit stared at him. One student, a boy he distinctly remembered accidentally shoving to the floor,

rubbed his head in a daze. "Mr. Hall Monitor…" the girl sweetly cooed. "I believe it's against the rules to run in the halls." *…Against the rules…*

Dear Heavens, he had broken a school rule!

His hand auto piloted by the mere notion of breaking a rule, Taka began to blankly scribble on his notepad. His mind raced with the implications of a *Hall Monitor — especially one who was going to be running for public office* — breaking the very rules that he demanded others to obey. *Was he becoming just like his grandfather?* "Uh… Mr. Hall Monitor?"

Taka ignored them as he turned around and sluggishly wandered through the halls, a yellow slip fastened to his pristine uniform.

"M-Mondo, I'm a bit, erm… *nervous*. I've never been with *these* types before in a close setting, so what if they — "

"Bro, if you keep calling them *'these types'* you're gonna get your ass kicked."

"B-b-b-b-but — "

"Calm down, man." Mondo's meaty palm landed atop his head and pet his scalp like a cat. Taka pouted and wilted as if he were a rose. "You're overthinkin' again! Listen, I'm here *all the time* and everyone here is real chill! As long as *you're* chill! Don't go about insultin' them."

He was lying. Mondo hadn't been in detention for *months*, ever since he and Taka had become close friends. "Why are you here, bro?" muttered Taka. "You didn't have detention today."

"Well…" Mondo's hand withdrew from his head and rubbed his chin idly. "I can't leave my best bud to temper the waves of detention by himself!"

Temper? That's a new word. Taka had just opened his mouth to comment on Mondo's updated vocabulary when the biker hastily pushed open the door and nudged him inside. Taka stumbled and caught himself on a shelf of unused school supplies, just in time to hear —

"Oh, are you fucking kidding me? You brought the *hardass*, dude?"

"He's not a — !" Mondo paused and glowered at the offending red-head. "Why don't you shut the *fuck* up, Leon?"

Taka groaned and pushed himself away from the shelf. "B-bro! Calm yourself! Leon is merely — " He held up his hands placidly, but Mondo growled and pushed him back. "Bro!"

"Stay out of this, Taka," Mondo hissed. He strode past him, towards the red-haired menace. Leon perched lazily on the edge of his desk, his collar opened in a way that was very much *not* compliant with the dress code. "This ass wants to meet Mondo's fist."

"I-I thought you said everyone was, uh, 'chill', bro…" Taka's rebuttal went unheard over the yells and cusses escalating between the two delinquents.

"KYAHAHAHA! Guess who just arrived, *bitch*!" *Oh no…*

Taka slowly tried to moonwalk away from the new arrival, Miu Iruma — one of the most frequent recipients of his detention slips — as she strutted

into the room like she was on the catwalk and immediately locked eyes with Taka.

"Yo, what the fuck? Swanky's here?" Her lips contorted into a scowl. "Oh, *hell* no!"

Taka grimaced and slowly slid into the nearest seat at the back of the class, numerous expletives and phallic objects sketched into the desk. Miu grinned and perched on the desk right next to him.

"Soooo, what're ya doin' here, dickwad?"

Taka flinched, his teeth scraping against each other and his fingers digging into the wood of the desk. He couldn't give out a detention slip right now. He needed to stay calm, resist calling the police, and bear with it. He was used to Mondo! He could take Miu Iruma! Albeit, Mondo wasn't nearly as rude as Miu was; even before they were friends, Mondo hadn't gone out of his way to antagonize him.

Well… That's not wholly true. Maybe he could *try* giving Miu a shot…

Taka's lips spread unnaturally thin on his face; he shakily turned to look Miu in the eyes. The girl raised an eyebrow and narrowed her gaze,. "H-hello, Miu Iruma! H-how are you doing on this…" His intense stare jumped from wall to wall in the decrepit classroom. "… *lovely* evening?"

And as soon as Miu opened her mouth to respond, a firecracker rolled inconspicuously into the room. Taka paid it a small glance, apt to continue his reluctant conversation with Miu Iruma, then *froze*.

"What? You lost your nerve, asswipe?" Taka stared into Miu's eyes, absolute terror brimming. Miu reeled back and froze.

"FIRECRACKER!"

Miu let out an ungodly scream as she fell off her table and cowered. Mondo and Leon paused their conversation to stare by their feet, where the firecracker ticked idly, and then proceeded to scurry away. Taka fell under his desk like it was an earthquake drill, hands clasped over his ears, and pointedly ignored the gum sticking to the spiky tips of his hair.

The firecracker erupted in a symphony of sparks and explosions. Miu screamed again, rolling around on the floor like she had been tasered. Mondo and Leon's distant yells and expletives echoed over the firework. Then louder than it all rang one malicious cackle.

Finally, the firecracker dissipated. Taka hesitantly crawled out of his hovel. Hiyoko Saionji strode into the room, a fistfull of pebbles in her hand, and began chucking them at all of the students in the room. Taka winced as a pebble nailed him straight in the forehead.

"Hahahaha!" she giggled. "Man, you should've seen your *faces!* Priceless!" She skipped and her skirt fluttered around her legs, the small girl planting herself in the desk right behind him.

Taka glowered and turned to Hiyoko. "That was extremely against the rules! You could've seriously injured someone! I should have you expelled!"

Hiyoko grinned and tossed another pebble at Taka's forehead. "You could try! But my family is in *real tight* with the faculty, ya know? They

wouldn't want to lose their biggest supporters!" She leaned closer and fluttered her eyelashes. "You wouldn't want to get on the principal's bad side, would you?" The hall monitor tried to reach for his detention slips, but they were gone. *He couldn't give detentions while in detention.*

Taka begrudgingly turned to face the front of the classroom. His fingers twitched as Miu and Hiyoko started yelling at each other. Something about Hiyoko's stature... He didn't care to pay attention. All he wanted right now was to stand up, demand the attention of the delinquents, and start scolding them on their inadequate behavior. But now *he* was in detention. As Mondo said, he couldn't go about insulting them. He had to remain... 'chill'.

"Shut the fuck up, you maggot-infested pig!"

"EEK!"

Taka grimaced and sank lower into his chair.

"What the fuck did you say to me, asshole?" Mondo snapped.

"You know what I said! Why the fuck are you even here, man?" Leon rebutted.

No. No. Taka stood up from his seat with a flourish and banged his thighs on the underside of the table, causing a loud thud to reverberate throughout the classroom. The two girls that he sat between jumped as he marched towards the front of the class.

Mondo and Leon paused their argument. Mondo hissed in a faux stage-whisper, "Bro! What the fuck are ya doin'?"

He turned to face the delinquents once reaching the chalkboard. "Hello! My name is Kiyotaka Ishimaru! I have a few concerns that I would appreciate if you all addressed!" He held his stance wide, his hands stiff at his side.

Leon audibly groaned and sank in his chair. "*Dude*, what the fuck?"

"First order of business! The teacher has not yet arrived! When will that be rectified?"

Miu guffawed and held her sides as she shook with barely contained laughter. "Hah! The teacher? Why the fuck would we need a teacher here?"

Taka paused, raising his hand weakly. "Um... Because you're in detention and a teacher is meant to be present?"

Leon clicked his tongue. "I've been coming to detention every day for the past year and there's never been a teacher here."

"Never?" Taka admonished. "Why, that's unacceptable!"

The other boy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, no shit. They just tell us to come. Sometimes they come to take attendance, sometimes they don't, so we pretty much hafta come here."

Hiyoko piped up. "Yep! It's too much effort for them to look after these losers!"

"Erm, Leon," Taka started. The wannabe rockstar perked an eyebrow. "You said you're here in detention *every day?* I've never had to give you detention. How is that possible?"

"Because I'm failing," he said simply. Straightforward, to the point, blunt... *And that made no sense.*

"Because you're... Huh?"

"*Yep*. All the tutors are booked for the third years, so they figured *this* might help." He gestured vaguely to the empty classroom. "Dunno how."

"That's..."

"Bullshit!" Miu sat up in her chair and pointed at Taka. "That's what you were gonna say, right? I'm right, aren't I?" Before he could admonish her bad language, Miu continued speaking. "I'm in detention every day, too!" She sat down again with a huff. "I'm a gorgeous genius so I'm not failin', but *apparently* the school's upset at how I'm utilizin' the dress code!" She pointed right at her chest and her open collar. "Why do we even have to wear these stupid things? Button-up, *really*? I can't be contained!"

Taka winced. He didn't agree with her reluctance to oblige the dress code, but she did have a point. Miu was particularly well-endowed, which must be difficult considering the uniforms that the girls are required to wear.

"Hah! You all are getting off lucky!" Hiyoko rolled her eyes. "I shoved that dumb bitch Mikan down the stairs and *she* got in trouble!"

"Excuse me?" Taka barked.

"Yep! All I had to say was that it was self-defense! And they believed it! Since I was involved I still have to go to detention, but at least that pig got suspended!"

Taka locked eyes with Mondo. The boy didn't look surprised. Rather, he actually looked like he'd known all of this information for a while! He shrugged at the confessions and started fiddling with his jacket.

What kind of leader would he be if he didn't help those in need?

"What subject are you failing, Leon?"

Leon jumped. "Uh — All of them, pretty much. Why?"

"We'll start with math." Taka strode to his backpack and dug out his math textbook. "If we have time before detention ends, then we'll continue on to physics. While you're being forced to come here, I can at least provide my support with some tutoring. Is that adequate?"

The other boy's eyes widened. "Y-yeah... That's fine, I guess..."

"And Miu," Taka continued, "I can arrange a meeting to talk with the school board about alternative top solutions for students such as yourselves."

Miu squeaked. "U-uh... Okay!"

"Hiyoko, you've publicly admitted to lying about the students you are bullying's involvement in their own injuries. I may not be able to expel you, but I'm sure that the principal would not be pleased to hear that."

Hiyoko growled, "Hey! Why do they get happy endings and I don't?"

Taka strode to the chalkboard. "Leon, please flip to page 137 in your own textbook! As you may see here, the quadratic equation..."

One day, the entirety of Japan may know his name. When that day comes, he'll improve the entire country.

He grinned as Mondo smiled at him, pride gleaming in his eyes.

For right now, he'll just focus on improving the school while he's at it.

Give Me A Break

Joltik {Collab with Snowharasho}

A goal is easier reached when broken into smaller milestones; a task, when divided into subtasks. Mental checklists, therefore, have always been a staple of Kirumi Tojo's modus operandi. Kettle, water, leaves, heat. Each step is so easy it's done before she can even think about it. She's a well-oiled machine, effective and efficient, and she wouldn't have it any other way.

It's a delicate process, making tea, but one Kirumi's well equipped for. With how many times she's done this, it'd be difficult *not* to get it just right, even with the limited resources of a high school cafeteria kitchen. If nothing else, it's a change of scenery from that paper-strewn council room.

Earl grey. Nothing says "bold simplicity" quite like it. Kiyotaka once mentioned offhand that it's his favorite. And since something tells her Chiaki wouldn't have a preference either way, she thought it'd be a good choice. Not that Kiyotaka asked for it. Not that he'd ever.

Kirumi sighs. That boy would work himself to death were he so allowed, refusing any kind of help offered to him in favor of trying to do everything on his own. And his stubbornness only worsens in anticipation of important events, which, of course, he *always* volunteers himself for. He's fussed and stressed for weeks over this festival, and after watching him crumple up what must have been his twentieth calligraphy attempt over an imperfect brushstroke, she finally decided enough was enough.

Someone's got to get him to take a break. And it certainly isn't going to be Chiaki, bless her soul. *She* could use one too, if anything.

And that, Kirumi supposes, is where she comes in. She's no stranger to the misery that is overworking, but she *is* apparently the only one on the student council who's learned to pace herself. Kiyotaka wouldn't allow her or Chiaki to wear themselves out on his watch, and if he refuses to apply that rule to himself, then Kirumi has no choice but to take the matter into her own hands.

The filling of the porcelain teapot marks her task complete, the citrus scent wafting from its spout the sign of a job well done. Kirumi lifts the tea set tray with a practiced hand and a satisfied smile, confident as ever in her little plan.

After all, who could possibly resist a good cup of tea?

ツミキ
10

Sweltering Heat with Ice Cream

Kimium {Collab with Nena}

The shift from spring to summer raced but from autumn to winter it meandered with a languid gait before sprinting towards the finish line. Autumn and winter created vibrant bursts of colour like paint smeared on a blank canvas. Colours would soon muddle into a dull, dirty brown before suddenly being covered with a stark layer of white. Cold would settle like a thick layer of ice being smeared across bare skin, leeching warmth until only pockets of heat remained.

Spring and summer transitioned subtly like the metaphorical frog in the pot of water. Heat had a way of slithering, extending its tendrils before smothering everything in a thick blanket. If Hajime's option was asked, which it wasn't, but he was going to give it anyway, summer heat was similar to a hot, wet towel slapping everyone while they sat in a sauna. Unwanted and unnecessary, but Japan and the Pacific Ocean didn't care. With the sun's rays and ocean breeze, everyone was subjected to the heat and humidity regardless of opinion. Modern conveniences could only provide so much aid before giving up.

Or, maybe Hajime's AC decided to say, "No."

Leaning back so his head fell upside down, Hajime stared at the AC unit mounted on the wall. His bare legs stuck to the tatami mat uncomfortably. The machine, nestled in the corner, had a green light to indicate it was on but the effect was minimal. Heat still lingered in the room and the cool air from the AC wasn't doing its job of warding heat away. The standing fan was broken and not pulling its own weight. Now the fan merely sat in the corner of the room as a glorified dust collector. Hajime's parents assured him they would toss it out once they found a replacement. However, it was already into the third week of the summer heat wave and no new fan had made its debut. Either they'd forgotten or they were waiting for an amazing sale. Hajime wanted to believe the second option was the correct option with all his heart. If not for his sake, then for the sake of the few indoor plants his mother kept. Hajime swore some of the leaves were wilting.

"Ugh, we would have had better luck staying at the library." Kazuichi groaned.

Hajime looked up and shifted so he was sitting properly on his worn-out cushion. "Sorry, but the sign-up sheet was full when I checked yesterday."

Nagito's lips twisted as he opened his pen, twirling it expertly between his fingers. "Next time I'm going to sign us up. I bet I'll be luckier than you." The last part was accompanied by a light laugh.

"Very funny, Nagito."

"You know," Kazuichi piped up from beside Nagito, "I can always take your AC unit apart and fix it."

"No way. You break that and I'll be the one in trouble."

"Hajime! I'd never break your AC unit! I'm studying so I can be a mechanic."

"That means nothing," Hajime blandly pointed out. "I've seen you break multiple projects. Let's not take that risk and ruin my family's AC unit."

Kazuichi wilted further, but Nagito reached and patted his shoulder. "There, there. Hajime is being cautious."

"Thanks." Kazuichi leaned slightly into the touch for two seconds before pulling away with a groan. "Ugh, I can't do this." He flopped forward, smacking his chin on his notebook. "It's too hot."

"I know, but we don't have a choice," Hajime sighed. "English quizzes aren't a joke." He tapped his textbook. "We need to review chapters three and four."

"I know," Kazuichi moaned, his voice half muffled by the paper of his notebook, "but I can't study if you're attempting to roast me alive."

"Technically, it's the weather and not me."

"Hajime has a point," Nagito added mildly.

Kazuichi shot a weak glare. "You're not helping! If I die, you're both accomplices."

Nagito blinked and turned to Hajime. "I suppose it's good if we're accomplices. Otherwise, one of us would have to call the authorities to report the crime. This way we can be each other's alibi."

"Na-gi-to!" Kazuichi huffed.

"What?"

Another glare was directed at Nagito. Nagito beamed. Hajime stifled a laugh.

Kazuichi let out another long groan. "Glad to know you two care about me." He sat up slightly, a bit of ink smeared across his cheek from his notebook. "But don't lie and say you're not dying in this heat."

On cue, the heat in the room swelled against Hajime's skin, pressing around him. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Hajime's face and hastily he wiped it with the back of his hand. Across the table, Nagito shuffled slightly. The mere sight of his hair sticking to the back of his neck sent a dash of relief within Hajime, grateful for having short hair.

"Fine, you got me. Hajime's house is an oven," Nagito tugged at his hair and with deft, practiced motions tied it back. "But what can we do about it?" He paused. "Besides the options already discussed."

Kazuichi snapped his mouth shut and directed his gaze away from the defunct AC unit. "Dunk ourselves in an ice bath?"

"I don't have enough ice to fill my tub and even if I did my parents would

kill me if they found out I did that," Hajime protested. "Also, I don't think my tub is long enough to fit all three of us inside it."

"Go to the pool?"

"We're supposed to be studying for our English quiz," Nagito piped up. "Obviously the smartest thing to do is drink something cold."

Kazuichi whipped his head around, snapping his gaze on Hajime. "Yeah! Why haven't you given us something to drink yet? You're being a poor host!"

"You literally didn't think of that until Nagito pointed it out," Hajime sighed.

"Neither did you! Bring us something to drink, Hajime!"

"Demanding..." Hajime muttered but stood up, wincing internally at the feeling of sweat on the back of his legs. "I have iced oolong-cha, iced mugicha, and water."

"Boring!" Kazuichi folded his arms. "You have old people's drinks. I prefer Calpico."

"Cal — " Hajime raised an eyebrow. "Sorry, I don't have Calpico. You'll have to suck it up." He turned to Nagito. "What do you want?"

Nagito hummed. "I have to agree with Kazuichi."

Hajime spluttered. Kazuichi laughed, nodding his head rapidly. "See? Two against one, Hajime! We don't want your boring old people drinks! Looks like we win this round."

"Win?" Hajime managed to find his voice. "Win what? If you don't want the drinks I have then we're back to square one. Well, you two are back to square one. I'm going to grab myself some mugicha." Hajime turned to leave.

"No, wait!" Nagito half leapt from the table and nearly tripped over it in attempting to grab Hajime's shoulder. "Don't subject yourself to a boring old person's drink."

"I happen to like mugicha, thank you very much."

Nagito stopped mid-stride which was good news for everyone in the room. No doubt if Nagito tripped he'd break something in the room, like his parent's expensive bookshelf, and injure himself. Hajime wasn't keen on a trip to the doctors or emergency because Nagito tripped over his feet.

Nagito's eyes widened as if he needed a second to recalculate everything he'd ever associated with Hajime. "You... like mugicha?"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, no." Nagito made a face before shaking it away. "Never mind. Why don't we compromise?"

Hajime tilted his head. "What is there to compromise? Unless by compromise you mean you'll accept one of the drinks in my fridge."

The twisted expression instantly returned to Nagito's face. "Ew, Hajime, no. I mean, we're all sweltering here and if this continues, we won't resume studying..."

Hajime opened his mouth to tell Nagito they hadn't started studying.

"...so, why don't we go out and buy something cold to drink? There is a Lawson store nearby. That way Kazuichi and I can at least have something we like."

"Oh! That's a great idea!" Kazuichi jumped to his feet, nearly knocking his textbook off the table as he stood. "We could also buy ice cream!"

"Yeah, we should!" Nagito was already strolling to the door and slid it open. "Let's go!"

Kazuichi and Nagito exited the room together, and it took Hajime a second to follow after them. The two were already at the genkan, stuffing shoes on their feet. Hajime hastily patted his pockets, only feeling the lump of his phone.

"Wait, wait, a second!"

Two pairs of eyes widened and looked up at him. Heads tilted slightly to the side.

"You... don't want ice cream?" Nagito slowly asked.

"Wow, I guess if that's what you want, we won't stop you," Kazuichi added. "As I said, you can stick to your boring old people drinks."

Hajime rolled his eyes and suppressed a groan. "Do either of you have money?"

They blinked impressively in unison, but Hajime didn't have time to be impressed. Both turned to look at one another before returning to Hajime. Their expressions morphed, brows furrowing and eyes comedically widening.

"Hajime—!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Hajime cut Nagito off. "One second. I'll grab my wallet."

Cheers echoed behind him as Hajime turned to quickly make a trip to his room. Side stepping over his school bag and a couple of rumpled shirts on the floor, Hajime grabbed his house keys and wallet off his desk. After a quick double check for money — thankfully Hajime had a few one-thousand yen notes plus some change — he returned to the genkan.

"Let's go." Hajime stuffed his wallet into his pocket as he slipped on a pair of sandals. "I suppose I can pay for our drinks and ice cream. If you can accept money from someone who likes old people drinks."

Nagito and Kazuichi spluttered behind him, and Hajime stifled a laugh at their protests. Outside the heat was heavy and almost palpable. Heat coated Hajime's throat and lungs with each inhale. Immediately his shirt became like a second layer of skin. Hajime swiftly locked the front door and walked the familiar path to the Lawson store. Nagito and Kazuichi's protests had died, either because they didn't want to waste their breath or because the heat had robbed them of the ability to talk. Maybe a bit of both.

Once they reached the convenience store, Hajime savoured the blast of AC as the door dinged to signal them entering. Nagito and Kazuichi scuttled past Hajime, heading directly to the coolers in the back. Hajime trailed after them, training his eyes on the ice cream. The majority of the ice cream was Hägen-Daz, the convenience store offering mini single serve containers alongside the larger ones. Scanning the flavours, Hajime opted for matcha and went for a larger container. After all, a single serve would be devoured before he returned home.

"Matcha?" Nagito's voice appeared at his side. "Good choice. Can you grab me one too?"

"Oh, now you're agreeing with what I like."

"Shush, I disagree with your taste in drinks. Not ice cream. Grab me a large container too, please."

"Fine, fine." Hajime did as Nagito requested before he raised his voice slightly. "What flavour do you want, Kazuichi?"

"Chocolate!"

Hajime grabbed the appropriate container and shut the fridge. "Do you have everything you want?"

Nagito nodded as he grabbed his ice cream container. "Calpico acquired."

"Great. Let's ring this up before Kazuichi decides to sneak in another drink."

"I heard that!"

"Good."

They made their way to the front, where Hajime purchased their items. The cashier put all their things into one bag but handed them individual spoons for the ice cream. Thanking the cashier, Hajime exited the convenience store, back into the heat.

"Ugh, give me my drink and ice cream, Hajime." Kazuichi reached for the bag.

Hajime side-stepped. "Nope. Save it for when we return home. Otherwise, you'll drink and eat it all before we return."

"Hajime! If we wait, everything could melt!"

"Then we better move quickly," Hajime replied before taking off, almost running.

"Hajime!"

"Hurry or I'll eat all your ice cream on you."

"You wouldn't dare!" Kazuichi's voice rose sharply.

Hajime turned so he could face them. "I don't know… You did insult my tastes in drinks earlier…"

Kazuichi's mouth dropped. Hajime picked up his pace, laughing as Nagito and Kazuichi's voices and footsteps echoed behind him.

Shall We Have Our Tea?

Eisleira

Look at it *(closely; You'll love it. Really? I assure you; our dear princess did her best. You'll love it, I swear)*. Look at it *(The gardens, the decorations, the chairs, the table. Everything was so… The princess went above and beyond this time)*. Look at her *(She was so magnificent, so diligent, so happy, to see us all. Her smile never fading. O, dear…)*. She definitely did her best. You should have seen that! There were flowers *(everywhere. We were in a blooming garden, it was… I can only think of the same words every time.)*. And then, when we got close *(A flower? Different for each of us. That was cute. Every lady loved it. You should have seen their faces, our faces!)*.

A chamomile for one who demonstrates energy in adversity *(Well, is it useful being worried? No, I never get worried!)*. A gardenia for one who inspires and leads the way towards the brightest future for everyone *(I'm just glad I have my classmates; my hope for the future is born, thanks to them, and I'm returning this favor to them everyday.)*. An amaryllis for one whose pride is as strong as her self-confidence *(When I'm with you guys… I feel like I'm gonna become a weirdo, but, hey, it's okay. We're all weirdos. It's cool right?)*. A violet for one whose dream is to collect in her precious album the smiles of the world *(A blue sky and people's smiles are my favorite pairing. Like, right now; a blue sky and my friends' smiles is an even better pairing.)*. A marigold for one who was lost *(felt loss)* and hopes to be found again *(Please forgive me. Find me. Don't leave me alone. Let's be friends. Please let's be happy all together…)*. A crocus for one whose ability to make people smile and bring happiness to others shines brightly *(As long as we are together, everything is gonna be fine; let's have fun. Don't worry; tomorrow is a new day!)*. A sunflower for one whose loyalty and dedication are beyond compare *(Talking to you all fills me with this strange calmness. If you'll have me, I'll never betray you all)*. An edelweiss for the hostess of our little party *(I have to guide my country after all. My life is dedicated to my country and people. I will be even more devoted! For they can rely on me)*. And an iris for the helper *(Words of wisdom are always needed; people have the tendency of putting themselves down. They should believe in themselves more. If only it was that easy… but it's still my duty to help, to make them believe in themselves)*.

And we sat *(and it was the best tea party I ever attended. Did you attend one before? Well, no. Then? Oh, please, you know what I mean. Well, yes but? The two ladies were… They really did their best… Yes, they did.)*. As Kirumi herself poured the Lady Betty tea in our cups, we began talking *(of everything, everyone. Every subject we could talk about, and that went on. Hours and hours. Laughs, smiles, friendship. All we could dream of, right?)*.

A Cute Little Makeover

Eisleira {Collab with Leghost}

Dear diary, you wouldn't believe what happened today. Well, nothing out of the ordinary to begin with. A day in school. And I was supposed to go out with Himiko after physical education! We were going to see a movie. Himiko said I would love it so I couldn't wait! But you know me, diary. Of course, I would stay a little longer. Come on, it's physical education. You know how much I love it. You should have seen the condition of my hair. It was so messed up. I was like these girls from horror movies. I was returning to the main class when I saw my hair. I couldn't go see Himiko like that, you know! So I tried fixing it. I tried so hard. But I didn't like it. At all. And I... I just wanted to be pretty. For Himiko!

And then, dear diary, I heard someone come in. I thought everyone left. I thought I was the only one left. And here he was. Rantaro, I mean. I was quite surprised to see him. He was always smiling and today he smiled too. And he saw me. I mean, my hair. Gosh, it was so embarrassing. I didn't want Himiko to see it! But here he was. He saw right through me! Embarrassing, really. Then he offered his help. I didn't want to accept. I don't need helping from him or any degenerate male. I don't need help! He asked me how much time I had left before I had to leave. And to be honest, not much. I didn't want to keep Himiko waiting. I accepted his help for Himiko's sake! He let a little laugh escape his mouth. He was gentle in his movements. And he was smiling as he started taking care of my hair.

"Don't worry! I'll wait for you." My fingers were shaking a little as I texted Himiko. She was so kind to me. And Rantaro, too, but.... *"You always look very cute! Can't wait to see you."* I couldn't help it. I smiled. And I felt at ease. It was weird, but I welcomed it with open arms. And I waited as he was working his magic in my hair. I was still nervous, and I told Himiko. As usual, she was the one who calmed me down. Just by being herself. I couldn't see Rantaro and I hoped he didn't notice my embarrassment. *"It's done,"* he said. And I jumped from my chair and ran to the nearest mirror... Meaning I took my phone and used it. You know when you want to take a selfie. I didn't want to wait any longer! And I smiled when I saw myself. I just couldn't control my smile. And my face. I was so red! I knew Rantaro was watching me. But he didn't make a big deal of it. I thanked him. Multiple times. As I touched my hair and looked at it. Again and again. He just wished me a good day and left, a smile on his face. I was ready to meet Himiko now. I went to see my little friend who actually couldn't shut up about my hair. And I loved every second of it, even though I didn't want to admit it out loud.

Say Hi To Chuck For Me

Joltik

He isn't sure what exactly got him to this point, but he's inclined to blame the half hour of nightmare-ridden sleep he's running on. Or maybe it's his slowly slipping grip on his grades and appetite and ability to think straight. Hell, chalk it all up to this general time of year, this grim anniversary that only gets more difficult to deal with every time it comes around.

Whatever the case, this *has* to be a new low.

"I just… I miss him, I guess. Wish I could see him one more time. There's so much I wanna tell him, y'know?"

Mondo shakes his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. Damn it, why is he telling *Hiro* this, of all people? Is this what he's been reduced to, unloading his personal woes onto the first person he sees? What is he even expecting to get out of this conversation? Sympathy? Comfort? *Advice?*

Hah, right. The day Yasuhiro Hagakure gives out a sound piece of advice is the day hell freezes over.

"Hmm, yeah, I get that." The self-proclaimed clairvoyant rubs his chin, before waving absently at Leon passing by their desks. "Actually, that kinda reminds me of something Korey was talking about the other day."

Do I even wanna know? "Korey?"

"You know, Korey? In the year below us? Skinny, long hair, wears a mask all the time?" Hiro's hand moves from his chin to his tangle of hair. "Cool guy, but he says some weird stuff sometimes."

Mondo's so wrapped up in the irony of that statement that he only catches the tail end of whatever he says next.

"…talk to ghosts. Said he can channel dead people, too. Pretty crazy, huh?"

Wait, wind that back.

"He can?" Mondo asks, more fervently than he means to.

"Well, that's what he told me, but I'm sure he was just pulling my leg. I mean, ghosts aren't real, right?" Hiro chuckles. "So that'd be ridiculous!"

Mondo's gaze drifts downward as Hiro's voice blends into the background, lost in the low hum of morning classroom conversation.

Ridiculous, huh…?

Not that he has any reason to give a shit, of course. Obviously. Hiro's probably right, for once in his life. Even if ghosts *are* real, *talking* to them is just impossible. Out of the question. That's all there is to it.

Naturally, then, the idea doesn't stick in his sleep-deprived brain all through class; it doesn't vex him long after lunchtime and quash any hope he had of paying attention or learning anything; and so he absolutely *doesn't* pursue it any further. In fact, he's not even thinking about it at all, because that

would be stupid. A waste of his time and energy.

...What was that guy's name again? *Korey?*

Mondo thinks he underestimated just how strong the stray chance of talking to dead people has gripped him, because he can't think of any other reason to have gone through so much trouble tracking down some creepy-looking first-year. Or to have just blurted out "can you really talk to ghosts?!" in a very quiet corner of the library.

The boy — whose name, he's since been informed, is actually Korekiyo — folds his hands under his chin, an interested gleam in his eyes. "Yes, I'm well-versed in matters one might call supernatural. Why do you ask, if I may?"

"I, uh..." *Just spit it out, asshole. You've already dug yourself this deep.* "I wanna t-talk to my brother."

"Mm, I see. And you're here to seek my help?"

Mondo nods, mentally bracing himself to be refused, laughed off, reproached with that unnerving golden stare. Something along those lines.

"Very well."

Or that.

"The loss of a sibling is often a painful one." Korekiyo opens up a leather-bound notebook, noting something down with a fancy fountain pen. "If this will ease your mind, I'd be more than happy to arrange something for you. A séance, perhaps, would be the most straightforward approach..."

And just like that, he's launched headfirst into planning something out. Most of his rambling flies right over Mondo's head, but he's clearly passionate about this. Obsessively so, even. He can sort of see where Hiro was coming from about this guy being weird.

"...take care of the preparations. Oh, and please bring at least one other person with you."

Mondo double-takes. "What? Why?"

"To channel the spirit, of course. I'd do it myself, but then I'd be unable to intervene in the unlikely event that something would go wrong." His tone is matter-of-fact, like it's the most obvious thing ever. "Ideally, this 'host' would be someone close to you, someone you trust, so as to maximize the chance of a successful connection. Do you have anyone like that in mind?"

...Unfortunately, he does. There's only one other person who knows the truth about Daiya's death. And yes, Mondo trusts them more than anyone, but that's really all the more reason *not* to drag them into this. Better back out while he still can. All he has to do is say no. *Sorry, changed my mind.* Easy.

"I... might know someone."

God damn it.

Kiyotaka Ishimaru is entirely too selfless for his own good.

Of course he pounced on the idea of a seance before Mondo could even finish telling him about it. Of course he was more worried about rescheduling study time than about the logistics of channeling a ghost. And of *course* it's led to him sitting across from Mondo in a velvet-draped room in Korekiyo's house, warm candlelight flickering across his still face, eyes eerily vacant from whatever trance the masked boy just put him under.

Somebody *really* ought to teach him how to say no to people.

Korekiyo lifts his bandaged hands to the low wooden ceiling, lilting some invocation that Mondo can't quite make out, save for his brother's name. *Daiya Owada.* Familiar, yet so foreign-sounding on his tongue.

The effect is startlingly immediate. An unnatural chill sweeps through the room, and not a moment later, Taka jolts like he's been zapped. His brows furrow; he frowns at his jittering hands like he's never seen them before.

"The fuck...?" he mumbles as if to himself, and it sounds distinctly *off*. It's Taka's voice, to be sure, but the inflection is all wrong. It's looser, freer.

Bewildered red eyes scan the dim room, landing on the candles, on Korekiyo, then on Mondo. They're not vacant anymore, but even through the haze of incense, it's clear that the presence behind them isn't the same.

Before Mondo can think of something to say, Taka(?) speaks again.

"S'that you, Mon?"

Mondo's breath catches in his throat, and he knows that this *must* be some kind of joke or trick, because not even *Taka's* ever called him that. "Daiya...?" he whispers, repeating to himself that this is just a *joke*, and it's *not real, so don't buy into it, you idiot* —

"Excellent. The channeling went perfectly." Korekiyo's deferential wave cuts into his scrambled thoughts. "The floor is yours."

It only takes a second for Taka(?)'s confusion to give way to realization and unmistakable excitement. He smiles, lazy and lopsided, nothing like his usual toothy grin. "Oh shit, am I being channeled? That's so cool." He tugs at his sleeves experimentally. "Didn't even know this kinda thing was possible."

Taka... would never joke about something like this. *Ever.* But that leaves only one other possibility, one that Mondo isn't convinced is better.

"Daiya?" he repeats, voice wavering. "Is that really you?"

"Of course it's me, dipshit! Don'tcha recognize your own brother?" Daiya blinks, hands reaching up to touch his hair. "Oh right, this is someone else's body, I guess? Who the hell's this kid, anyway?"

"He's, uh..." It's admittedly a little tough to get over hearing *dipshit* in Kiyotaka's voice. "His name's Taka. He's a friend of mine."

"God damn." Daiya cracks his neck and rolls his shoulders. "And when'd ya start hangin' out with tin soldiers instead of human beings? This dude's posture is *unreal.*"

Mondo can't help but laugh a little at that. "You're tellin' me."

With every spoken word, it becomes easier to believe that his brother truly is in their midst. Taka probably would have loved to meet him, now that Mondo thinks about it. Just another *if only* to add to the pile, then.

"So." Daiya sobers and hooks a thumb towards Korekiyo, who's curled up in a cobwebbed corner of the room. "Zipper-lips over there said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Oh. R-right." He did indeed; therein lies the problem. "About that…"

Daiya nods slowly, as if sensing his trepidation. "What's up?"

"I…" Mondo knew this would be difficult, but not *this* damn difficult. He sighs and bows his head a little, unable to look his brother in the eye when he mumbles, "I'm sorry."

A pause. "Sorry? For what?"

"Don't be an asshole. You *know* what."

"The hell're you — wait."

Something clicks behind those eyes, and for a moment Daiya just stares at him. Not with anger or disgust, but with some strange mix of disbelief and exasperation. And then he drags a hand down his face with a groan.

"Oh, come *on*, don't tell me this is about the accident."

Mondo balks. "Wh — the fuck else would it be about?!"

"Did you seriously wake me up from my eternal goddamn rest just to apologize for something *I* did?"

He *cannot* be serious. "Whaddya mean *you* — *?*"

"You're not gonna, like, tell me how school's goin' or something? Introduce me to this Taka guy, maybe?"

"What? No — "

"Or, I dunno, ask me about Chuck? He misses you, y'know. You were always his fav — "

"Daiya, *please!*" he snaps. It comes out way too harsh, he knows that, but he *really* needs to get this off his chest, more than he's ever needed anything. Thankfully, Daiya shuts his mouth, bushy brows raised.

"How'm I s'posed to just move on from this?" Mondo forces himself to lower his voice. "I'm reminded — every day I'm reminded that you're *dead* 'cause of me. I have to *live* with that knowledge, and it's fuckin' tearin' me apart. And I know I can't do shit to fix it now, but would you at least let me say sorry? Ya don't gotta forgive me, I just… need ya to know I'm sorry."

The silence that follows is oppressively heavy, and something other than the incense is making it hard to breathe. He searches Daiya's borrowed face for any kind of reaction, emotion, *anything*.

But all he gets is another one of those lazy, easy smiles, and the absolute *last* possible response he could have imagined.

"Alright. I forgive ya."

And Mondo can only ask the first thing that comes to mind: "Why?"

The smile doesn't budge. "'Cause I wanna."

"Well, ya shouldn't."

"Too bad. I'm doin' it anyway."

"Dai, ya don't fuckin' get it — "

"No, *you* don't get it," he cuts in sharply. "I don't go around sacrificin' myself for people who don't deserve to live. You were a *kid*, Mondo. Kids make mistakes. And they shouldn't have to pay that kinda price for 'em."

"But that's not fair to *you*, dammit." *I don't deserve forgiveness; what about that don't you understand?*

"Who cares? I mean, it worked out, didn't it?" Daiya gestures to him. "You're proof of that. You're alive. You're growin' up, stayin' in school, you've got friends and shit… You're doin' okay for yourself. And seein' that…" His expression softens. "Makes me think that little trade-off was worth it."

Mondo bites his lip and lowers his head into his hands, trying to figure out how the hell he should respond to that.

"Daiya…" he starts after a minute, "Th-thanks…"

"Nah, don't thank me." He feels a hand on his shoulder, and another lifting up his face. "Just keep on livin', alright? That'll be thanks enough."

Silently, Mondo nods, afraid his voice will betray him.

"Good." After a pat on the shoulder, Daiya drops his hand and glances Korekiyo's way. "Hey, uh, not to cut things short, but I think I'm tirin' this poor kid out." He pokes his chest. "Should prolly give him his body back soon."

"Yes, that might be wise."

So this is goodbye, Mondo thinks. A proper one this time. Now if only his eyes would quit burning…

"Alright." Daiya turns to him. "Good seein' ya, Mon. Glad we could — "

"Wait."

"Hm?"

He has no idea what he's going to say until it leaves his mouth. "Could you… say hi to Chuck for me?"

He grins. "You got it, tiger."

And with a wink and a wave, Daiya's gone as quickly as he arrived, leaving a dazed-looking Taka in his place. Korekiyo approaches the red-eyed boy to steady him and coax him back into awareness. It's a good thing, too, because Mondo doesn't think he could form a coherent sentence right now.

"What happened?" Taka murmurs.

"The ritual was a success," Korekiyo tells him. "You did wonderfully."

Taka opens his mouth to reply, but stops when he looks up at Mondo. "Bro? Is everything okay?"

Mondo grits his teeth, grabs Taka in a tight hug and buries his face in his shoulder. Taka hugs back right away, no questions asked, which… is nice. It's a reminder that yes, he *does* have friends, people like Taka who care about him and want him to be happy. People who want him around, whose lives he's had a positive impact on.

Daiya was right. He's still here. He's alive. And he's doing okay.

Just keep on livin', alright?

Yeah. He can do that.

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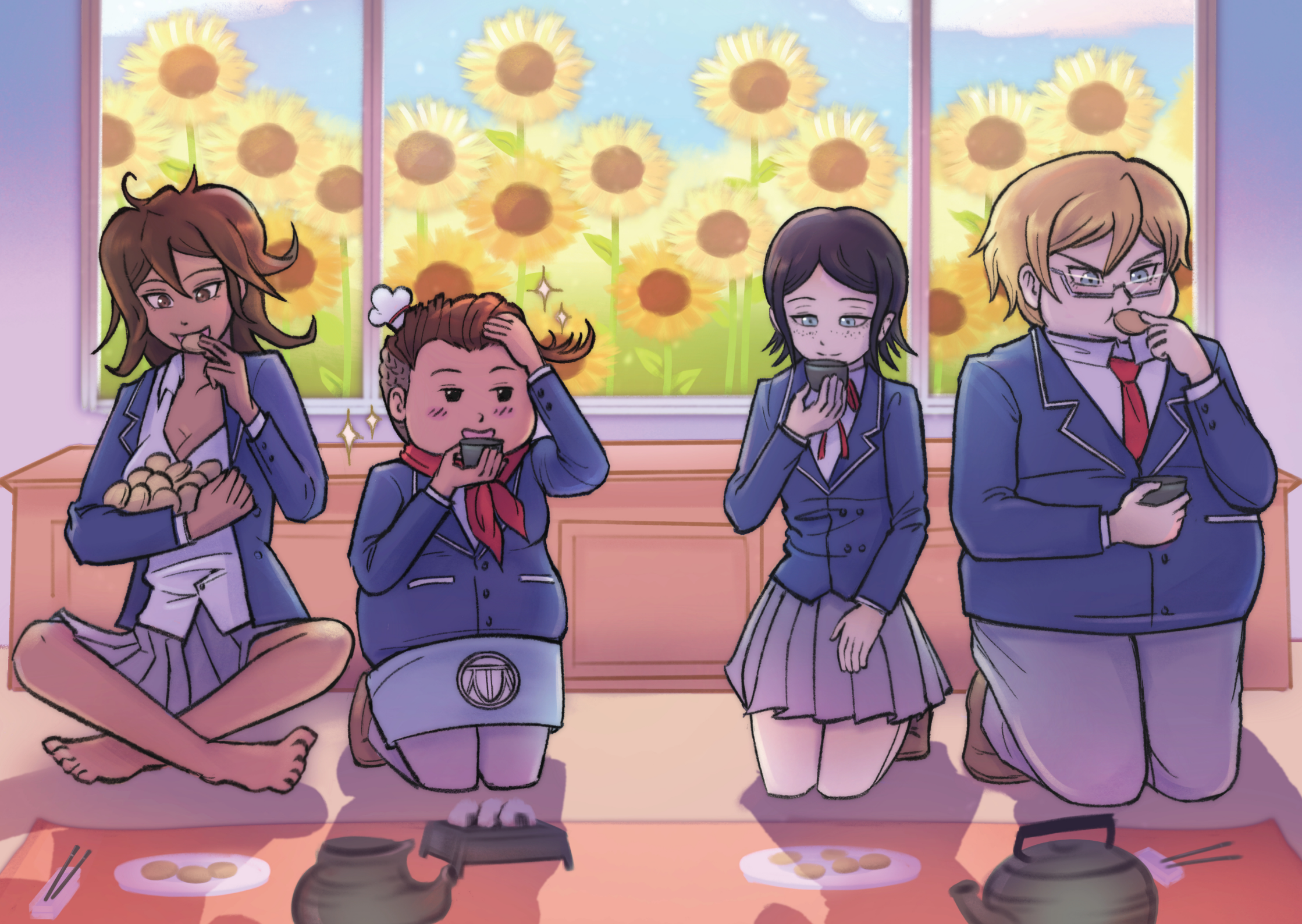


All For One

Eisleira

"Come on, girls, show some spirit and let's go!"
He was clapping his hands — a big smile on his face,
The girls had to be ready in time — and they will.

His eyes were cast on the first pair;
"Are you prepared, Ikusaba?"
"Always," she said, locking her eyes on Miss Pekoyama.
For the *glimmer of their eyes* cannot be ignored,
As the *clashing of swords* was echoing in the room,
As the ladies danced *their way to victory*.

And on the other side of the gym,
There was a raging fight,
But fear not — the ladies were too deep into it,
As Akane and Tenko broke through their defense,
Sakura and Maki were ready to show them what they've got,
"Give everything you've got, team!"

Aren't you satisfied, Mister Coach?
Look at you now, crossing your arms, analyzing each move,
You would hate yourself if you let a simple mistake pass.

With your guidance, you knew — *they (you) will win,*
For they (you) already have all they (you) need — *no doubt,*
They (you) will seize victory as a deserved prize — *their (your) prize,*
As long as their (your) determination never dies,
"You will prevail, ladies."

A Record Of Everyone

Magi {Collab with Flora}

"It's not much," Kizakura was saying. "Just a couple of pictures to show the place off. A couple of student pictures taken by the best student photographer. Hehehe."

Mahiru never much cared for Kizakura, especially when he laughed at his own lame jokes. Being an absent-minded drunkard with that lame sense of humor, he reminds her of her dad. His office is just as messy as her father's, with bottles scattered about, messy table tops, and most annoyingly, an unevenly pulled up blind on a dirty window. Kizakura even wore a similarly pitiful and pleading sort of look and it's beyond agitating.

He doesn't even flinch when leveled with her unimpressed glare. He just waves his hand. "You don't have to if you don't want to, Koizumi-san."

But what kind of photographer would you be if you couldn't do something this simple?

Mahiru can just imagine this infuriating man thinking something like *that*. She may not be much of a photographer compared to her mother — but *still*...

"Obviously," she huffs. "I'll do it."

"Glad to have you aboard," Kizakura chirps as if he'd drink to that.

Urgh... Well...

She isn't doing this for *him*. She's — she's doing this for herself.

Yeah.

"I just can't believe you let that loser talk you into this, Mahiru-nee."

Hiyoko twirls around, making sure to smile as Mahiru takes her first picture. Despite Hiyoko voicing dismay, Hiyoko seems to enjoy it. She even strikes an elegant pose.

"I wasn't talked into it." Mahiru adjusts her lens for the next shutter chance. She's thinking it should be Hiyoko in motion. "This is my passion."

Rather than twirl around again, Hiyoko makes a face. "You sound like a certain *someone*."

Ah, yes. She knows immediately who Hiyoko's referring to. *Him*.

Unfortunately, speak of the devil...

"Oh!" is Sonia's elegant exclamation as she comes in with another party, gaping at Hiyoko up on the stage. "I'm so terribly sorry! I did not think the auditorium was occupied!"

"What the hell?! Why are you here?" Hiyoko balks.

"I simply wished to use the stage as practice, Saionji-san!" Sonia chirps, never one to lose her poise. "For the upcoming play! I must not partially-ass my role!"

"Not you!" Hiyoko jabs a finger in the direction of the *unfortunate* accompaniment Sonia had with her. "Him! Why's he here?!"

Komaeda Nagito only ever laughs when spoken down to. It's an unsettling laugh, too, with a smile that Mahiru doesn't want to look at, much less take a picture of.

"Oh, Komaeda-san?" Sonia tilts her head, innocent and lilting. "The play is in English, and Komaeda-san's one of the few who's completely fluent."

"That someone like me was asked to assist a princess is one of the highest honors," Nagito purrs in that skin-crawling wispy tone of his. "Even if I'm unworthy, I couldn't dare refuse." It was another cringeworthy moment with this guy, but this time, Nagito's far too sharp gaze notices. "Koizumi-san, you're taking pictures?"

Hiyoko gets in between them with a harsh glare, which, while appreciated, isn't necessary.

"If you and Sonia-chan are going to practice, I'll take pictures of you two as well," Mahiru said, maintaining cold civility. "It's going to be in the upcoming magazine."

"For sizzling *reals*, Koizumi-san?!" Sonia's quick to gush. "Would it really be alright if I were included?! Even if I am inexperienced in modeling for these... *commonzines?*"

Actually... I...

She realizes it as Nagito's eyes lit up like a spotlight.

I shouldn't have told him *about this*.

"Aha, obviously they'd entrust this to our Koizumi-san!" Nagito exclaimed. "You must capture our academy at its brightest! The school's wonderful, powerful image rests on your shoulders!"

No pressure.

"I'll just take the same candid shots I always do," Mahiru said, biting her tongue as Hiyoko scowled. "I'm not someone who likes staged shots if you get what I mean."

"I do not! That seems rather

contradictory!" Sonia said matter-of-factly. "Is it code?! Zine code?!"

"It means she wants *natural shots,* cheese-brain," Hiyoko snapped.

"Ooh! Everyone in their most *natural* state!" Sonia's eyes were sparkling. "How artistic! I would not mind taking a few in the garden myself!"

"N-No! What the heck?!"

With how adorably flustered Hiyoko and excited Sonia got, Mahiru snaps a picture of them.

"There are many noteworthy spots, Koizumi-san," Nagito chatters in her ear, shattering any second of content she could have. "You'll get all of them, right? The plaza, the greenhouse, the mural, the old building..."

"I *know* what I'm doing," Mahiru hisses. "You don't have to worry. I'll..."

She trails off when she notices that Hiyoko and Sonia are still bantering. Sonia's smile is so dazzling that she does take another picture, even if it's one where Hiyoko's pouting. She'll keep that to herself, and as for the magazine...

As for that...

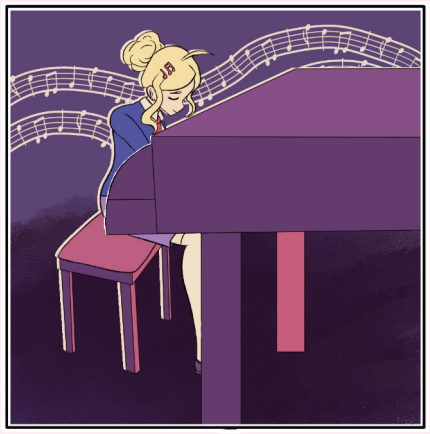
Nagito's looking at her so expectantly. It's nerve-wracking.

"I'll be fine," she asserts because she has no other choice. "But I guess I wouldn't mind... hearing about those spots..."

The so-called Ultimate Academy is a big place. The student body is varied and colorful, housing all sorts of unique hobbyists and even a few celebrities. It should be a photographer's dream, but she mostly finds it overwhelming.

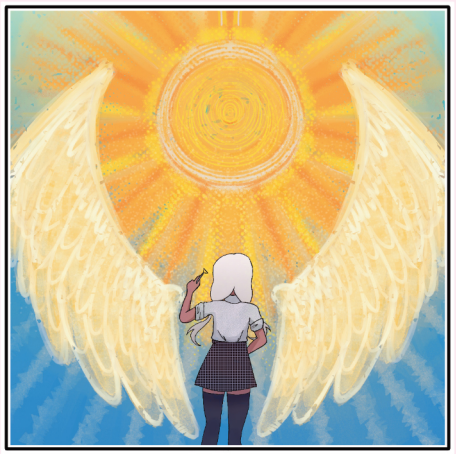
That's still no reason to slack off!

In the music room, Kaede practices vigorously. Perfect shutter chance. There's the mural that Angie's working on. Also perfect. And worryingly hypnotic. Kazuichi and Miu have created a terrifying mecha — seemingly for the purpose of playing tennis with Ryouma. Despite his speed, Mahiru gets a picture of him grinning harder than he hits. The perfect energetic shot that's sure to bring a lot of life to the magazine.



There are a lot of moments like that to catch. Gundham is always acting on some grand adventure with whatever animals he gathers. Gonta could easily stand toe-to-toe with him when it came to insects. Kiyotaka and Mondo were helping Chihiro train again. They were struggling, but still smiling. Sakura and Aoi are always so relaxed when they chat. They're even having a picnic — although Mahiru only snaps a fewpictures before Akane and Nekomaru come barreling in.

Tenko flung them away, but the moment still got ruined.



Too much, Mahiru thinks. *They're always just... too much.*

Her own classmates especially. Upon hearing her camera, Ibuki demands Mahiru take pictures of her during practicing for her next concert.

Too much, Mahiru thinks. The horrific nightmare of the last concert gave her no choice, despite Ibuki's eyes sparkling with expectation. *I can't go through that again!*

With a pitiful apology, Mahiru turns on her heel and flees.

She manages to lose Ibuki in a courtyard, but only after taking a serious tumble down the hill. Protecting her camera, Mahiru weathers scrapes and bruises until gracelessly smacking into something that lets out a sharp, high-pitched yelp.

Whoever she had literally rolled into was not only knocked over, but the poor girl had even dropped her notebook.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry!" Mahiru rushes over. "Are you alright?"

The girl sniffs, turning to her with watery eyes and a trembling lower lip. "I don't know where I am or who you are, so I have no idea why you'd attack me," she blubbers. "D-did I — did I do something wrong?!"

"No!" Mahiru takes the girl's hand to pull her up. "It was just an accident!"

Mahiru almost stumbles again from the effort, but she still retrieved the notebook for the girl that — actually she doesn't recognize either. The notebook is at least titled. *Memory... Journal? Otonashi Ryouko?*

"Where am I?" the girl was wondering. "Where is here?"

"Um." *Ryouko, right?* "Hey. This is... yours, right?"

"Yes!" Ryouko exclaims, snatching the notebook back immediately. "That's mine! No stealing! I need it to, to remember where I am! And who I am!" Ryouko flips through it quickly. Whatever she sees and reads has her nodding firmly. When she redirects her attention to Mahiru, she frowns. "Who are you?"

"I'm...uh..." Mahiru shifts. "I'm Koizumi from Class B. Nice to meet you, Ryouko-chan."

"Oh!" Ryouko exclaims. "You have a camera! And you know my name! Suspicious! Are you here for an interview?" Ryouko half-hides behind her journal. "I'll tell you anything if you have pictures of Matsuda-kun!"

"Matsuda?" Mahiru vaguely recognizes that name. "Who?"

"Matsuda-kun is Matsuda-kun! I'll tell you anything if you have pictures of Matsuda-kun!" Ryouko insisted. "It's only fair!"

Mahiru stares at her, but before she could ask for clarification, Ryouko's eyes go blank.

"...Um." Ryouko straightens up. "Who are you? Oh! You have a camera! There's a boy I really like, so could I get you to take his picture?"

"Uh?" *What is going on?* "Ryouko-chan?"

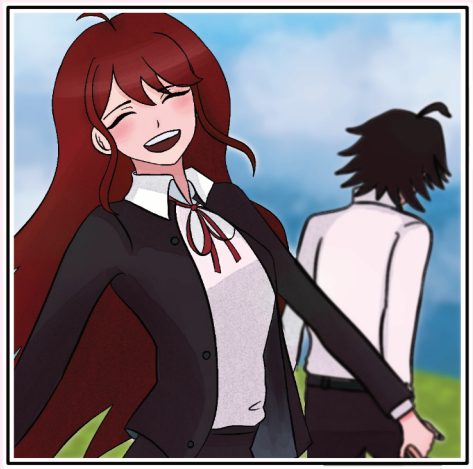
"How do you know my name?! Oh, I must've introduced myself." Ryouko nods to herself. "Makes sense. Oh, you look roughened up. The camera looks fine, but are you okay?"

"I'm..." *So, so confused right now.* "I think I'm fine."

And then, shouting.

"Why the *fuck* did you run off?! Do I need to keep you on a leash?!"

"Matsuda-kun!" To that vulgar, angry shouting, Ryouko perks right up. "It's Matsuda-kun!"



Oh. Mahiru grits her teeth as the so-called Matsuda ran up to them. There wasn't just a fuming, angry guy she disliked on sight, but also a more familiar just as unpleasant accompaniment.

"Oh, Koizumi-san!" Nagito exclaimed. "What happened?! We should take you to the nurse! Maybe Tsumiki-san can...?"

"I'm fine," she snaps, even if she wobbled from the effort of smacking his hand away. In contrast, Ryouko was already happily letting herself get yanked along by that *jackass* — !

"Hey!" Mahiru yells after them. "The least you could do is ask if she's alright!"

Matsuda casts her one unimpressed stare, looking her over once.

"You stop being stubborn and let that *idiot*." He indicates Nagito. "Take you to the nurse."

"You—!" If her limbs didn't protest even while shaking in fury, she'd seriously show him a piece of her mind! He was already set on ignoring her, too! And Ryouko...

"Matsuda-kun, Matsuda-kun!" Ryouko was chirping as she was pulled along. Looking so happy, in fact, that Mahiru ended up taking her picture on instinct. *Urgh.*

"Are you sure you're alright?" Nagito asks, but when Mahiru deems him unworthy of an answer, he perks right back up with, "So dedicated! As if you were born with a photographer's heart! The magazine will be wonderful thanks to your valued contributions."

Wonderful... Right.

"I knew you could do it," Nagito kept gushing. "By the way, have you learned to appreciate everyone a little more? Everyone here really is incredible."

Incredible... Except.

"Matsuda-kun's ambition is so admirable! Toujou-san is so diligent! Momota-kun is so reliable! Although Hagakure-kun..."

I guess there's one thing missing.

"Of course, I admire everyone in *our* class and you especially — !"

Mahiru snaps his picture. Nagito's smile drops, and Mahiru shuts her camera off.

"If it's the school magazine, I need a picture of someone who loves the school. The smiling face of someone who loves this school from the bottom of his heart. Now everything is perfect."

Nagito blushes. "Uh... Huh?"

For once, Mahiru is the one cheekily grinning. "Actually, I'm aching all over, Nagito. Can you take me to Mikan-chan?"

"O-oh! Of course! Let's go, Koizumi-san!"

With a guy who was as nervous as he was earnest, Mahiru is nothing short of satisfied with everything she accomplished.

"Huh?"

As she was checking over the photos, there was something — seriously *strange* with Nagito's picture. In the background, there was a shadowy figure. It looked like a *ghost* with long stringy black hair. It even had the blood-red eyes. And it was just... lurking in the trees...

Mahiru shuddered.

I'm sorry, Komaeda. I don't think I can use this.

The Mainstay Members of the Literature Club

President-Homewrecker

Toko hates the literature club.

She hates the literature club, but more importantly, Toko hates the people she's stuck in it with.

Toko hates that they're familiar enough for her to remember their names. It would be so much easier if she could just call them by epithets, like side characters in a novel, too unimportant to name, but they've spent enough time together that she remembers their names, their hobbies, their *preferences*. No longer fanfiction girl, fanfiction *boy*, and the weird detective kid, but Tsumugi, Hifumi, and Shuichi. It's disgusting.

The club sees a number of students waft in and out, but most of them take one glance at the regulars and decide this isn't the club for them.

Toko can't blame them. The only reason she even stays in this stupid club is because it gives her a quiet place to write.

The library — and pretty much any other place on campus — sees a nonstop influx of foot traffic, meaning that anyone could come up behind her and read what she's writing, or slam her laptop shut on her fingers, or pull her chair out from underneath her once she's focused enough to let her guard down and — Toko cuts herself off with a shake of her head. It won't do her any good to spiral before she's even reached her daily word goal.

It's just easier for her to write here, where her biggest threats are the two weirdoes arguing about fanfiction and the quiet kid in the dumb hat. At least they leave her alone.

Toko tunes out their chatter — today Hifumi and Tsumugi are discussing some magical girl show and how an alternate turn of events would change the theming entirely — in favor of tapping away at her laptop.

The background noise is nice, centering. Just enough to make her not care about the garbage she's producing. Toko misses when she could crank out full drafts in less than a month, when she was so absorbed in the joy of creating that she could hardly pull herself away from her laptop. Now it's a struggle to reach a thousand words every day.

Toko nearly jumps out of her skin when Tsumugi plops down in the seat opposite her, offering a big grin and nothing else. "Hi, Toko!" she chirps. "How are the words today?"

Toko glances at the sticky note she stuck to her computer, with her starting word count for the day written in bold, mocking numbers. It's right by the trackpad, meaning that it gets covered by her wrist more often than not, and that's probably for the best. She'd rather not be constantly reminded that she's only managed fifty words in the hour she's been in the clubroom. "What do you want?"

If Tsumugi is taken aback by her attitude, she doesn't show it. She just smiles and shrugs, like Toko isn't making a pointed effort to be rude. "I was just curious! I always love to hear about your work, and it's been a while since I checked in."

Toko tries not to roll her eyes. She's heard that before, more times than she can count. People pretending to be interested in her writing just so they can make fun of her, babbling away about people that aren't real. She's learned that it's best to say as little as possible. "I-it's going fine."

But even that isn't enough to make Tsumugi drop the polite smile. "Well, if you ever need a rubber duck, I'm more than happy to listen to you talk through any problems! I do it all the time for my fic writing friends!"

Toko bristles at the comment about friends, unable to take it as anything but a slight. She's very aware of her lack of friends. Well, she has a few, but no one that she'd bother with her writing problems. At least this affords her a semi-mean response.

"Yeah — well, I wouldn't wanna waste time explaining the plots, e-especially with sequels and stuff."

But that only makes Tsumugi perk up, more intrigued than ever. "Oh? Which sequels? I might have to do a reread if you want me to check for continuity errors, but you wouldn't have to explain any background info!"

"Y-you've read my books?"

Tsumugi grins. "Each and every one! I love your earlier works, but the fantasy elements you've been incorporating into your latest releases have been especially captivating!"

She has to be lying. This has to be a trick or a scheme or *something* because no one likes Toko's work enough to want to talk to her. She can't count the number of autograph-seekers who walked away disappointed because their favorite author is nothing but an overly paranoid, stuttering super-loser. Like Tsumugi is going to be any different.

"Who's your favorite character, then?" Toko challenges.

Tsumugi purses her lips in thought, and Toko is so sure that she has Tsumugi cornered, when Tsumugi finally chirps, "It's a hard choice, but it'd have to be between Mariko in *The Rise of the Winter* or Yui in *The Reconstruction*. I know they're from completely different genres, but they both have these lovely character arcs of finding their self-confidence and it's so inspiring to see them both grow!"

Toko tries not to cringe. She's supposed to smile and thank people when they get specific with compliments, she knows, but she *hates* hearing stuff like that. Her more recent work has gone from slight wish-fulfillment to outright projection, and for someone to pick up on it makes her feel like her own lack of self-confidence is on full display.

"W-wow. You really know your stuff." *The Rise of Winter* didn't even break fifty thousand in sales, and while *The Reconstruction* saw more commercial success, it barely made a splash critically and she hasn't touched historical fiction since. So either Tsumugi knows what she's talking about or she's really dedicated to the prank.

"You know, I was actually planning a cosplay of Mariko," Tsumugi says. She must think she's found her metaphorical foot in the door because she's gone from grinning to full-on beaming. "Do you think you'd be interested in helping me tie together the minor details? I've never had a chance to get the actual author's opinion before!"

"Why would you wanna cosplay one of my characters?" It's not like anyone's going to recognize her at one of her cons or whatever. Toko's never really cared to find out what Tsumugi does; it sounds like too many people.

"Because she's amazing!" Tsumugi's voice rises to a half-shout, catching the attention of both boys. "And wearing a cape with all of her worst memories embroidered into it? How could I take that as anything but a challenge?"

This has to be part of a prank. There's no way around it. No one ever does this much for *Toko* of all people without an ulterior motive. The only person who ever extends beyond kindness out of courtesy is Komaru, and Toko suspects it's only because attending a different school has spared her from seeing Toko at her most annoying.

But Toko's always dreamed. No matter how often those dreams have been broken and stomped on and thrown out the window, she's always had that tiny, hopeful voice in the back of her head, telling her that this time it might be different.

And Tsumugi's nice — like Makoto Naegi levels of nice — so maybe it wouldn't hurt? She's secretly hoped for a moment like this, where someone cares about her work enough to create something of their own. But commissioning fanart feels like cheating, like she hasn't earned it, so she's just waited.

And now that the opportunity has presented itself, she doesn't have the will to be suspicious.

"Yeah, s-sure. I'll look at it. Maybe. I-I guess."

Tsumugi beams like she's been offered the world on the platter. "Oh, thank you! Hold on, let me get the outfit!" She scurries over to her work table.

Because of *course* she has it ready to go.

Toko barely has time to roll her eyes before the garment bag is being shoved into her hands.

"Now, it might hang a little weird because it's not fitted for you specifically, but I don't think it'll be too much of a problem since none of Mariko's outfits are particularly form-fitting."

"M-me?" Alarm bells are blaring, crying, *danger, danger, danger!* Here's

the setup, meaning that the punchline is an extra inch's worth of trust away.

"Of course! It's your character, and I can think of no one who could portray her courageous spirit than you!"

That's when Toko realizes Tsumugi isn't misguided, but completely out of her mind. Toko, courageous?

Her shock must be written all over her face, because Tsumugi continues, "So much of yourself goes into your writing; I can tell every time I read it! And if sharing that with the world is courageous, I don't know what is!"

Toko's face burns. The only thing that stops her from thinking she's being mocked is the disgusting amount of sincerity in Tsumugi's voice. "Fine. I-I'll wear the stupid outfit. But everyone has to turn their backs while I'm changing!"

Tsumugi only half-listens. Apparently working with costuming greatly reduces one's sense of boundaries, because Tsumugi has no problem readjusting Toko's boobs so they sit better in the gown after Toko changed into it.

The worst part is that the costume's *spot-on*. Every ribbon is perfectly in place, every scrap of cloth framing her figure. From the way the sword is hooked to her belt, to the rings that give Mariko her powers, to the way her hair is carefully pinned back away from her face.

It's like Tsumugi plucked the outfit right out of her brain and made it real.

"So?" Tsumugi's practically vibrating with excitement, bouncing as she sways side to side. "What do you think?"

Toko pulls the snow-white cape forward, barely able to make out the embroidery without her glasses. It's all detailed in light blue string, making it even harder to see, but she knows each moment all too well. Mariko being locked in a dungeon for witchcraft. Mariko being pushed into a snow leopards' den as part of a classmate's prank. Mariko's crush using her to learn the secrets of her family's magic. It's all a familiar tune woven with thread and fantastical elements.

"Th-this is ridiculous. I look stupid."

"I think you look really nice, Toko!" Shuichi pipes up. He smiles shyly, his face still half-hidden behind the novel he's reading.

Toko reels in her scowl but doesn't answer. He seems too sincere for her to snap at him in good conscience. Not that that has ever stopped her before, but the last thing she wants to do is lose the only place she can write in peace.

"You've captured the aesthetic perfectly," Hifumi adds. He adjusts his glasses. "Very much pre-revolution Mariko."

"Or how she is after the first battle," Shuichi adds. It's probably the most Toko's heard him say at once. "When she's alone in the courtyard. That's my favorite chapter, actually."

Okay, now she *knows* they're messing with her. Honestly, they could've had her if they didn't *all* go in as fans of her book. She flings out her arm, and

Tsumugi just barely manages to duck in time. "There is n-no way all of you read that stupid book!"

"I didn't think it was stupid," Shuichi answers. "I'm not really into high fantasy, but I liked it a lot! I could tell there was a lot of passion behind it."

Toko has no idea why her face burns as much as it does. Maybe because she feels like an imposter, a faker disguised in Mariko's barely there likeness. After all, she described Mariko as being *beautiful*. Toko knows better than anyone she doesn't fit the bill.

"You know what I think..." Tsumugi trails off. She has a contemplative finger to her chin, looking Toko up and down like she's fit for a legitimate cosplay contest. After a beat, her scrutinous frown gives way to a bright smile. "I think that no one could capture Mariko as well as you, Toko!"

An unbidden image comes to Toko's mind, of her at the head of an opulent table, friends filling every seat. Friends that would go to war with her. Friends that would trust her with anything and vice versa. Longing seizes Toko's chest with a painful pinch.

"I-I doubt that," Toko says.

But Tsumugi just grins, nodding over her shoulder at the boys. "Let's ask then, shall we?"

Toko's beginning to think it's more than a coincidence that Tsumugi just happened to have this outfit on hand.

"Definitely close to how I was picturing the character!" Shuichi agrees.

Hifumi nods along. "This will definitely be a jumping off point for Mariko's design if I decide to continue with my fanfic."

Part of Toko wants to get indignant at the idea of him using her for his gross fanfic, but for some reason, that part stays hushed and quiet, still reeling from the idea that they're basically implying she's *pretty*. They have to be pranking her... right?

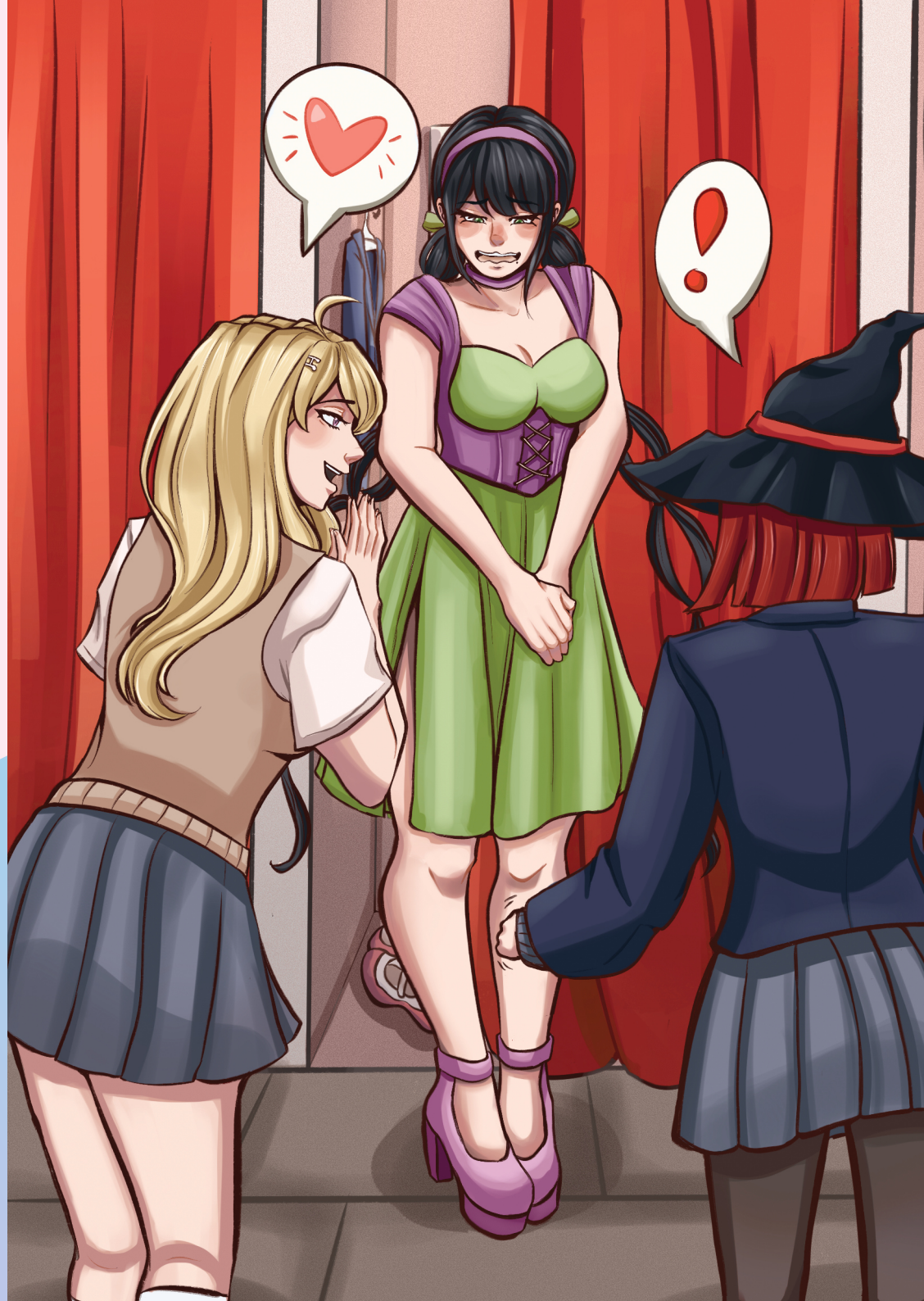
"You know, Toko..." Tsumugi begins, a faint tremble of laughter in her voice. "I think sooner or later you'll have to submit yourself to the mortifying ordeal of accepting a compliment."

And if that doesn't sound like a challenge... "O-okay. Fine. I'll t-take a compliment for once. Thank you for liking my book." It takes everything in her not to tack on the adjective *stupid*. Her face only reddens at the way the three of them smile at her. "Are you happy?"

"Very!" Giggling, Tsumugi taps her on her nose, which has Toko scrunching her face in distaste.

She wouldn't call them friends, by any means.

But she'd be lying if she said she wasn't looking forward to their next meeting time.



GUYS COME ON!

"To Be Determined" By Ibuki and Keebo

Carizma {Collab with Catriona}

"Alright, students! Time for Keebo and Ibuki's performance. Everyone, please give them a warm welcome." Chisa clapped as she moved back to her desk and Ibuki and Keebo made their way to the front of the class.

"Our band name is Rockstar Robot and this song is called: To Be Determined." Ibuki pulled her guitar strap over her head and began playing a hard rock song. Nobody in the class could understand a single word that Ibuki was saying and instead turned their focus to Keebo who was standing there with a straight face holding his triangle.

Well, they couldn't understand Ibuki the entire song except for one word when she yelled, "KEEBO!" She pointed to him and her guitar went silent. He slowly lifted up the stick and hit his triangle. The sound rang throughout the classroom and everything once again fell silent. Nobody said, or did, anything for a while after they finished their song.

Ibuki stood with a proud smile and hugged Keebo, "You did so good! Perfectly on time and everything. Next time, you are singing."

Keebo got a proud look in his eyes as Ibuki complimented him. "I would love to sing next time if you still want to be my partner."

"Rockstar Robot will never break up, Keebs. Never."

"Well," Chisa stood up. "That was very... explosive! Thank you very much, Ibuki and Keebo."

The duo made their way back to their seats as everyone in the class clapped for them. Kaede had a stunned look on her face. Sayaka was clapping proudly and Miu was screaming like she was at a rock concert asking for an encore. Hiyoko rolled her eyes as Kokichi ended the recording he made and giggled as he began sending it to people.

"You did incredible, Keebo! I can't wait to see your next song," Angie whispered to him as Keebo sat next to her.

"Next up today we have Miu and Kaede! Please make your way to the front and get ready to perform, girls." Kaede groaned inwardly as Miu ran to the front and grabbed an electric guitar. Kaede took a seat at her piano, "Miu... do it how we practiced please."

Miu winked at her and they began.

A Queen's Gambit

Eisleira

Tick, tock, your clock's ticking,
Tick, tock, you have to move *now*,
Tick, tock, your time is up!

Their eyes were moving,
From their fingers to the chess pieces
To their destination.

One gambled on her luck,
The other only considered victory as an option,
But who could win — no, who *would* win?

Each move could be the last,
Each move could lead to victory — or *defeat*,
Each move was calculated.

O, dear, you should have seen that battle,
Celestia's and Byakuya's faces — O, dear, hilarious;
They were so deep into it, the entire room disappeared.

"Celestia will win; her body language says it all."
"How foolish, lady detective. Togami will certainly win — he has to."
"And what do you think, Nanami?"
"I'm on Team Celeste," she said, *"Mister Byakuya version 2.0."*

They, too, gambled, for one's victory,
But I wonder, you know,
How come no one knows the outcome of that battle?

It is said only the five people in the room know,
If you ask, they won't answer — *or they would say*
Shall we let this be a mystery?

Happily Never After

Animercom

Makoto peered out from backstage at the audience. The gym was packed with people watching the cultural festival's play. Classmates' parents and their younger siblings occupied every fold-out chair and bleacher of the basketball court. Their excited murmurs echoed off the gym's high beams. Makoto spied Ibuki and Kokichi eating crepes that they snuck in. A baby cried.

Makoto smiled. *The* Sleeping Beauty *play has been going well so far.* He glanced onstage.

Miu, the evil fairy Maleficent, was sitting on a throne with her pig and crocodile servants, Teruteru and Kazuichi. The front of Miu's black robes lay open to reveal a very sheer two piece. Glitter covered her skin. "You've been searching for Princess Aurora for sixteen years and all this time you've been searching for a baby? Really? You're not jerking my tits? Fuck me. God, I need to snort my fairy dust powder. That'll send me flying high."

Makoto winced. *Mostly well, anyway.* A thrill of nerves churned Makoto's stomach. *It's almost my part…*

"You ready?"

Makoto turned. Backstage reeked of paint. Large cardboard set pieces lay against the back wall. Costumes hung from rolling racks. Boxes were haphazardly stacked, props spilling out. Makoto squinted in the dark to see Kaito approaching.

Kaito asked, "You're not nervous, are you?"

Declaring "directors get costumes too!", Kaito wore a black and white kimono and haori reminiscent of a shogun, shades, and a Sherlock Holmes pipe. He loosely held the arm of a doll prop which served as baby Aurora from the opening scene.

Did he randomly pull that getup from boxes around here, or is that his image of a director…?

Smile strained, Makoto rubbed the back of his neck. "It's just I know how unlucky I can be sometimes. And we didn't have a lot of opportunities to practice. Especially, uh, you, Kaito." He had often skipped rehearsal to visit the batting cages with Nekomaru and Mondo.

Laughing, Kaito clapped Makoto's shoulder. "Don't worry, don't worry! It'll be all right. Your suave director will back you up." Kaito winked behind his shades. "Just follow my lead."

Yeah, that's what I'm worried about.

The lights over the audience dimmed. Curtains fell.

"That's my cue! Gotta head up to the control booth. Go onstage after my narration." Grinning, Kaito swung the baby doll over a shoulder. "Break a leg and — oh!" The baby's head popped off. Rolled onstage. "Whoops, there goes the head. Haha! Anyway, crush it out there. The performance, not the head!" Waving, Kaito jogged off.

"R-right." Stomach knotting, Makoto tugged his tan tunic. His Prince Philip costume consisted of a red cape with a collar, belt, and brown pants.

Red curtains rose to reveal a forest backdrop. Angie had painted a sweeping array of spindly oak trees, budding bushes, and a fallen log. Cardboard tree cutouts framed the stage. In the center was a large, flat boulder.

Over the ceiling speakers, Kaito began speaking. "Thanks to Maleficent's interference, Princess Aurora would fall asleep if she was pricked by a spinning wheel's spindle. To protect her, three fairies hid Aurora deep within a forest. They raised Aurora without telling her she was royalty. On her sixteenth birthday, they sent Aurora out to pick berries."

Holding a basket, Akane stumbled onstage in a blond wig. She wore a beige blouse with a black over bodice and a full-length skirt. Dango dangled from her mouth.

"Princess Aurora had grown up into the most refined and elegant lady of the land. All the animals of the forest were awed by her grace and singing."

Akane downed three dango off the stick in one bite. Sucked soy sauce off her fingers. Scratched her armpit. "Yeah, no." Scowling, Akane pulled off her wig. "Ain't singin'."

"Well… guess she's got a sore throat today, folks! Singing aside, anyone who'd lay eyes on her would fall in love. Because she's a rad girl, yeah? Strong, independent, badass and, you know, all that other good stuff. Au — *rawr* — a, amiright? Hahaha! Anyway, the prince was conveniently nearby, so he heard her singing — uh, her chewing."

Shoulders squared and cape flapping, Makoto strode onstage. He covertly kicked the baby head behind him, out of sight. *Time to improvise, I guess…* Gasping, Makoto put a hand to his chest. "Such a beautiful maiden… Have we met before? I feel as if we have, once upon a dream — "

"Hey, you!" Akane tossed the basket aside. Brow raised, she crossed her arms. "What's a gross old dude doing watchin' me? Hoping to cop a feel?"

"Wh-what?!" Face red, Makoto glanced at the audience. *This play is meant to be family-friendly!* "I just want to dance with you." Singing, Makoto approached her, hand outstretched. "I know you, I met with you once upon a — "

Akane smacked Makoto's hand away. "Told ya no feels."

"I'm not!!" Huffing, Makoto shook his head. "I know I am a stranger, but already my heart is yours. Is there some way I can ingratiate myself to you or your kin?"

"How about cash?" asked Akane.

"H-huh?"

Akane picked an ear. "Bet if ya gave my pops, the king, some cash, he'll think

about it. Hell, *I'd* think about it. That's why I joined this play in the first place."

"Kaito bribed you?!" The audience burst into laughter.

"Well, yeah. Why else would I be in this fancy getup?" Grimacing, Akane scratched her side. "Man, this stupid costume is so friggin' itchy!"

Rip.

Akane scratched so hard, her fingers tore through the fabric. "Huh. Might as well go all the way."

"W-wait, no!"

Roaring, Akane ripped away the black over bodice. Tore off the end of her skirt. Pulled off her sleeves. Ripping off her collar left a generous view of cleavage. With her impromptu V-neck, midriff showing, and only tattered shreds covering her legs, Akane looked like a rag-wearing cavewoman. "Woo, much better!"

Makoto gaped. The audience silenced. Ibuki's and Kokichi's chewing crepes filled the gym.

"Want a dango?" asked Akane.

Makoto started. "You have another one? Where?"

Akane fished a dango stick from her bra. Held it up. Soy sauce gooped onto the stage.

Lips parted, Makoto shook his head back and forth a fraction. *Wow. I haven't been this sexually harassed in a while. Forgot how it feels.*

Grinning, Akane thrust the dango at him. "Eat up, Maurice!"

"It's Makoto! I-I mean Philip — I mean no! That's disgusting."

"Don't be shy, Mark. You're so small, you gotta eat!"

"I don't want it! Not when it's been in your — "

"But dango's delish — "

"I said NO!"

Makoto shoved Akane's hand back. Eyes wide, Akane clutched her chest with a pained gasp. Collapsed to the ground. Lay still.

Makoto blinked. "Huh?"

Opening an eye, Akane held up a bleeding finger. "I got pricked by the dango stick. Now I'm dead."

Makoto smacked his forehead. "It's a spinning wheel's spindle!"

Sweating, Makoto glanced at the audience. Murmurs stirred through them. *Ohhh, what do I do?* In his heavy prince costume, Makoto felt the stage lights baking him. *There's supposed to be, like, three entire scenes before she falls asleep!*

Well, I guess I can't leave her like this. Grunting, Makoto picked up Akane's form and laid her atop the large boulder center stage.

Over the speakers, Kaito's voice echoed through the gym. "Whoa, what a twist, folks! Aurora fell victim to the curse because she was pricked by a dango

stick. This is what happens if you eat dessert before meals, kiddies! Now Aurora is sleeping soundly."

Akane started snoring. "Caaa shooo… Caaa shooo…"

"Silently."

Exhaling loudly, Akane rolled her eyes. She turned to the side, back facing the audience, and curled up in a fetal position. After pulling out another dango from her bra, Akane munched on it. Scratched her backside.

Makoto's eye twitched.

"Alas, how unfortunate!" Head bowed, Makoto balled his cape and held it in a fist to his chest. "How do I break this spell and awake her from her slumber? If only there was someone who knew."

Ryoma entered. Glittery wings nearly half his height protruded from his back. The veil of a large cone hat formed a strap beneath his chin like a baby bonnet. His blue dress was so large on him it ballooned out like the blueberry girl from Willy Wonka. Grunting, Ryoma stumbled on the gown.

Makoto laughed.

Glaring, Ryoma snapped his head up. He bit off his candy cigarette. Ryoma approached center stage, crushing the cigarette butt along the way. Makoto gulped.

Brow raised, Ryoma looked down at the script. Spoke in a monotone voice. "What's going on? Explain yourself…" He glanced up. Saw Akane with her clothes half-off. "Actually, don't."

Makoto's face reddened. "She ripped them off, not me! But never mind that!" Lowering his voice, Makoto hissed, "What are you doing here, Ryoma? The fairies aren't supposed to show up until the next scene!"

Ryoma stared Makoto dead in the eyes. Blinked. Tossed the script over his shoulder. "Whatever."

"No, not whatever! There's still hope we can salvage this! Where's Ibuki? Ibuki is supposed to be one of the fairies, not you."

Shrugging, Ryoma pulled out a cigarette from his pocket. Idly rolled it between his fingers. "Ibuki's missing. She said she'd get crepes for us before the show but must have gotten lost or something."

Clamping her face, Ibuki shouted from the audience. "GASP! I'M SUPPOSED TO BE ONSTAGE! IBUKI'S IN DEEP SHIT!"

Makoto held his head in his hands. *This is a disaster.*

"This is just as well, right?" asked Ryoma. "Better to skip a scene or three than waste more of everyone's time. So to get the play done with faster, go to Maleficent's castle and — "

A giant mechanical dragon erupted onstage and crushed a cardboard tree. Miu rode on its back. "Hey boys! Wanna play with my long snake?"

Makoto cried, "Ahhh! Not that fast! Not that fast! What the heck, Miu? What is that thing?! You were supposed to wear a dragon costume, not — "

Ryoma exhaled in relief. "Geez, best thing to happen to me all day. Now I can leave." Popping a candy cig in his mouth, Ryoma waddled off stage.

"Wait, no, Ryoma! Don't leave me!"

Face flushed, Miu hugged herself. "How long were you gonna make me wait for my grand entrance? Like fuck. You're just blue-balling meee!" wailed Miu. The steel dragon raised its head and roared, flames spewing forth.

The audience screamed. Parents scooped up crying children and raced for the exits. Faculty guided students and families outside while calling for help on their phones.

Eyes wide, Makoto fell backwards. Sweat coated his pale face. "It can breathe fire, I'm gonna die, it can breathe fire, I'm gonna die…"

Panting bursts of fire, the dragon approached. The stage vibrated with every footfall. It had a low, thick body reminiscent of a komodo dragon. Long black horns protruded from its narrow head. Wings expanding, the dragon loomed over Makoto. Its slit eyes glowed red.

Miu grinned. "Feeling it heating up, or is it just me? After all, things are coming to a head!"

"Ah… ah…!" Breathing hard, Makoto scooted backwards on his behind. "I don't wanna be roasted barbeque; someone, heeelp!!"

Akane leapt up from the boulder, standing between Makoto and the dragon. Drool and soy sauce covering her face, she had seven dango sticks in her mouth. "Ohm mhthm nm pmthm!"

Kaito jumped through the control booth's glass, haori flying, and landed into the audience. Yelping, they flinched back. "Our narrator, the true hero of the story…" Knee and fist to the floor, Kaito raised his head and grinned. "…joins the Smash Bros. battle!"

Makoto shouted, "This isn't a game! Just what the heck are you guys doing?! You should be running for your lives, not — ah!"

Akane picked up Makoto and tossed him over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Man, for a prince you sure are a weakling."

Kaito joined Akane onstage, and they squared off against the dragon. "Yeah, move aside, Prince Philly Cheesesteak, and let the real heroes, the princess and the narrator, fight it out."

Makoto flailed his legs. "That doesn't even make any sense! You're not seriously fighting — "

Drooling, Miu cupped her face. "Ahh…! My body is ready. Pound me with your meat, I mean, like a sack of meat." The dragon bellowed. It echoed throughout the expansive, empty gym. Rows of foldout chairs lay scattered on the ground like bodies after a battle. Fists drawn back, Akane and Kaito charged.

Makoto screamed. "No, don't, please! Put me down, put me doooooown!"

Behind the Curtains

Eisleira

A cacophony — *(no doubt)* the euphemism of the year.
The pianist and the singer thought they lost their ears.
They underestimated their fiasco - poor souls.

They needed something — perhaps a spark?
Hm, who could have this as her trademark?
How about this colorful musician from the other class?
"Fear not!" said Ibuki *(heaven help us),*
"All we have to do is sit down and discuss."
A simple advice but rather useful *(don't you think?).*

And she thought of a dancer, someone from her class,
For she knew she would love being on a scene *(o, this lass),*
"Didn't you think we need another musician?"
The singer got it covered — from a bat to a guitar *(that magician)*
"How about our clothes? We're not designers!"
A smile from Sayaka — she had the perfect girl *(master of the eye-liner).*

A cacophony — from a disaster to a work in progress,
For they would all work to overcome the distress.
Together, they would reach their goals.

And our team became Cinderella overnight *(praise your fairy godmother),*
Even miracles take a little time *(with love, thank her),*
All the musicians worked hard to create a melody *(of their hearts),*
And the singer did her best to write a suitable song *(a fine art),*
A melody without proper choreography? *(to accompany our diva)*
O, dear students, the time has come *(show them!).*

And here you stood *(their world was on pause),*
For you all live for the applause,
And as you heard the first notes *(booms'n'claps),*
You could all breathe again *(their snaps),*
And as you delivered an outstanding performance,
O, dear students, you shone radiantly *(before all of us).*

A cacophony — unveil an agreeable symphony!
And as they drew the curtain, you could hear their plea in harmony,
"Until next time, dear fellows."

Field Day

Ixcarus {Collab with Karu}

Shuichi Saihara hates the sun.

The thought comes to him slowly as he gazes at the vibrant blue skies, not a single cloud in sight. Even under the shade of the courtyard trees, he's unable to escape the scathing summer heat. His skin is uncomfortably sticky, his gym uniform tight and suffocating with all the sweat trapped in between its creases. Moving will only make things worse, Shuichi thinks, but even with his best attempts to stay still, he feels like he's seconds away from melting into the grass.

Not for the first time today, he wishes he could be anywhere else.

"Getting' ready for the race, sidekick?"

It takes a moment for Shuichi to register that there's someone trying to talk to him. He looks up and finds Kaito Momota standing over him, smiling brightly and hand outstretched with a chilled water bottle.

"Something like that," Shuichi responds an off-beat later, graciously taking the drink. Kaito sits beside him without further comment, and for a moment, there's silence between them. It seems that the heat has even gotten to the usually bombastic "Luminary of the Stars!", as Kaito's smile fades into a grimace, fanning his shirt in an attempt to cool himself.

Shuichi sighs, bringing the water bottle to his forehead and shivering at the temporary relief. Well — this is the best form of cooling down he's going to get out here. As much as he craves the indoor air-conditioning, he knows that there's not much he can do about it.

Field day at Hope's Peak Academy is no joke, after all.

They've done the class competitions: a grueling game of tug of war, where Gonta pulled so hard *everyone* went flying, a soccer match where they were disqualified after Miu tried to implement a machine to score goals for her, and, of course, a volleyball tournament where Himiko fell asleep in the middle of a serve. Even with all the training he does with Maki and Kaito after school, Shuichi can feel the effects of performing the strenuous activity for the entire morning settling in, a dull ache latching onto his muscles as he tries to relax his skin.

Which is why Shuichi finds himself dreading the upcoming track and field race as the representative of class 5-C. Although, at this rate, the only race he'll be taking part in is to see whether he'll pass out from heat strain or exhaustion first.

He's lithe, sure, but he's by no means athletic like his training partners, or Ryoma, or Tenko, or — well, a lot of his classmates, actually. He's

not sure why the class voted for *him* to run.

Well... now that he's thinking about it, that's a lie. He has an inkling he's been chosen all because of that one story he told where he tracked down an alligator with his uncle. It doesn't matter if his classmates have seen him passed out after Gonta once ran into him to give him a hug, he supposes, if he has "Alligator Wrestler" on his resume.

Except, he never really wrestled an alligator, just found it. And he sure as hell hasn't qualified to represent class 5-C. Not when he's never run for long for a few minutes, and *especially* since the other chosen representative wouldn't be of any help, since it happened to be...

"Yahoo~! Shuichi, are you ready to run?" Kokichi Ouma pops up from behind, purple locks of hair falling against wide, mirthful eyes.

Ah. He's really screwed, isn't he? Class 5-C will lose. Class 5-C will lose horribly, *pathetically*, and then they'll become the laughingstock of the school and it'll be all *his fault* —

"Woah, what's going on in here? Heat started frying your brain too hard?" Kokichi says, bonking Shuichi on the head and interrupting his train of thought. "You look like you're thinking too much — it's just a race, what's the big deal?"

The "big deal" is that I'm expected to win, Shuichi thinks sullenly. *That I don't think we can. That everyone is going to be looking at me, depending on me, and, as always, the only thing I'll be able to do is flounder when I'm needed most.*

"Easy for you to say," Shuichi grumbles, instead of that.

"Ugh, Kokichi, can't you just go and get ready for the race somewhere else?" Kaito sighs, halfheartedly shaking his fist at the other.

"Sorry, sorry, no can do! You see, I came over here to get my beloved Shuichi — cause the race is starting soon!"

Kokichi's words send Shuichi's heart plummeting. *Oh.* Shuichi isn't *near* ready for this. He thought they had more time. As he slowly rises to his feet, he can already feel his legs trembling. *This... this isn't good.* Nervously, his eyes sweep to the other students that are already gathered around the start line on the track field, taking note of who he'll be up against.

There's Junko Enoshima from class 1-A sitting by the grass while on her phone, looking positively *bored*. Shuichi would be more surprised to see the fashion-forward student if he didn't hear rumors about Junko completely destroying every other class in all the sports events last year. Although, her current casual demeanor doesn't seem to match that description...

Chatting excitedly beside her is Aoi Asahina, stretching for the event. Shuichi knows her to be an avid athlete, talented not only in swimming,

but basketball, soccer, and, as his luck would have it, running.

The person beside her is also going to be a tough match. Akane Owari from class 2-B is positively beaming as she jogs in place, eyes laser focused on the path in front of her. Shuichi's also heard a lot about her — about how she could've won the track and field race last year, if it weren't for the fact that she had stopped right before the finish line to fight the next runner.

Staring at them now, Shuichi feels horribly out of place.

There's no time to overthink it anymore, though. Kaito gives him one last reassuring squeeze before he's being pushed towards the track. Stumbling, all he can do is struggle not to trip as Kokichi marches on ahead. Shuichi pulls up the racetrack with hesitant, careful steps, lagging behind the other.

It's not fair, Shuichi thinks, the way Kokichi can go forward without a single care in the world.

And it's as he's standing there — trembling, a nervous wreck, wishing he could *really* melt into a puddle and evaporate into molecules of air — that Kokichi looks back, comes closer and leans

And *smacks* Shuichi in the back of his head.

"O-ow! What was that for?" Shuichi stutters out, looking bewilderedly at the other student.

"You're thinking so loud that even I can hear you," Kokichi says while rolling his eyes. "Again, calm down, will ya? It's just a little race."

Shuichi pouts. "Last time you said that, it ended up being *more* than just 'a little baking' and Kaede's birthday celebration got completely ruined after we set fire to — "

"Details, details. It all makes for a good story now, right?" Kokichi interrupts. For once, when Shuichi meets Kokichi's eyes, there's none of the usual cunning mirth that has his head spinning with truth and lies — only a strange, genuine sort of neutrality.

"I-I guess..."

"You need to learn to let yourself relax once in a while, Shuichi! Which is why..."

When Kokichi trails off, Shuichi raises an eyebrow. "Which is why...?"

"Hey, you two punks ready to eat *dirt*?" A voice calls, interrupting the two. Shuichi looks over to meet Akane's crazed glare, already in a crouched position.

Oh no. Oh no, the race must be starting, Shuichi realizes, and a beat later he hears the whistle of the referee cut through the noise of his head like a piercing arrow.

Start!

Multiple things happen at once, so quickly that Shuichi barely has time to process it. Akane shoots off like a bullet, leaving behind only the echoes of her cackling laughter and dust clouds. Aoi sprints off in a similar way, yelling something or the other about how she "Won't lose!" In stark contrast, Junko simply starts walking, still on her phone and ignoring the disappointed groans from her classmates.

And beside him, Kokichi decides to *jump on his back*.

Letting out a startled yell, Shuichi's knees almost buckle under the added weight as he stumbles forward. He instinctively moves to secure Kokichi into a piggyback hold, and in response, Kokichi grabs onto the back of Shuichi's gym uniform and lets out a warbled battle cry.

"Go, go, *go!*" Kokichi shouts, pointing forward and practically pulling Shuichi along with his gravity.

And later, Shuichi will blame the heat, and the way it's reduced his mental facilities to barely functional. Later, he'll blame the pressure, blame Kokichi's conniving smile, blame his class for voting to make him run. And any other day, he would've shrugged Kokichi off, he tells himself.

But in the present, with the summer sun bearing down on him and Kokichi's warm hands clutching onto his shirt and his head spinning with a hundred thoughts at once, Shuichi does as he's told.

Shuichi *runs*.

He runs, legs burning with a wild, fervent desperation he hasn't felt in a long time. Above him, Kokichi lets out a laugh, carefree and swelling as they wobble around. Too busy trying to get one foot in front of another, Shuichi doesn't realize that they're passing their class on the side until Kokichi calls out, voice taunting and shrill.

"Kai-to!" he sneers, pulling down his bottom eyelid mockingly. "Your hair looks even stupider from here, nishishi!"

What an obvious instigation, Shuichi thinks.

But of course, Kaito seems to take offense, pointing at them accusatory.

"Hey, get off my sidekick's back; you're slowing him down! And my hair *isn't* stupid!"

Ignoring Kaito, Kokichi turns to look ahead. "Oh, look, we're catching up to Aoi! Heeey, Aoi, we got some donuts for you!"

That gets Aoi to come to a halt, looking back with wide eyes at the mere mention of *donuts*. "Huh?" she says, obvious eagerness in her voice.

They catch up, slowly — and then run past her. Shuichi's too tired to think while Kokichi sticks his tongue out. "Oh, but that was a lie!"

"H-hey, that's no fair!" Aoi whines, starting to run again but obviously having lost momentum.

Oh god, he belatedly realizes, clutching onto Kokichi's thighs to ensure the other doesn't fall. *We're getting into so much trouble with this.*

But with the soles of his feet pounding against the track, the random noise from the crowd of students blending together into mere background chatter, his heart rapidly pounding from the adrenaline of the race, Shuichi comes to a realization.

He... doesn't care.

He just *doesn't care.*

Because suddenly, the eyes of strangers and classmates aren't on him — they're on Kokichi, as he mocks the other students and runners with his charming, commanding smile. And despite Kokichi being an added weight to his back, Shuichi feels something in his chest lift.

Today, Shuichi Saihara is the representative for class 5-C, running in the track and field race.

And sure, maybe his classmates want him to win, and would be disappointed if he doesn't, but...

Before any of that, he realizes that somehow, he's having fun. Running, breathing, *living*, the concept of winning or losing fades away completely.

With the summer heat and Kokichi on his back and the roar of the students behind him, Shuichi smiles.

And as he passes the finish line, he doesn't even know if he's second or third or last, but Kokichi jumps off his back with a wild grin and holds out his hands for a double high-five. Shuichi meets it with enthusiasm. His palms sting, his legs are still trembling, and his entire body aches, but as he stares at the blue sky above...

Shuichi feels like a winner after all.

PET DAY!

Invention Fair

Mokuhchi {Collab with Dodo}

Miu Iruma didn't know what to do. Normally, she could easily figure out what invention she wanted to make next, but this time she was stuck so deep in a creative block she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to claw her way out of. She felt horrifically stuck, almost like her brain was wading through waist deep mud. Miu ran her hand through her bangs, combing out the wavy locks that weren't tucked into the ponytail.

"Damn it," she mumbled under her breath, hitting her fist on the table, causing loose screws to rattle across the wood. She looked up and spotted a familiar head of hot pink hair working on his own project, while K I-BO watched him from the other side of the table. "Kazuichi! K I-BO!" she shouted across the classroom despite not needing to.

"Hm?" Kazuichi said in response, not even looking up from his tinkering.

"I'm trying to figure out what I should make for this invention fair I'm entering. Any ideas?"

"No. Sorry, Miu," he responded. Miu turned to K I-BO, her head tilted to the side in a questioning gesture. He shrugged. Miu just let out a sigh in response as she lifted her goggles and placed them atop her head. She fixed her ponytail and grabbed a clip that she had in her hair to pull her bangs out of her face again, standing up as she did so.

"Whatcha workin' on?" she called, while she made her way over to the other side of the classroom. She noticed the scrap metal littered across Kazuichi's table, bits of wire and small screws covering the table and gathering on the floor.

"Oh! It's this mini, like, Nekomaru robot for Akane."

"Aww, that's sweet. Can't believe Akane has a robot kink. K I-BO, you better watch out." K I-BO just rolled his eyes.

"What have you been working on?"

"Only the most amazing inventions ever!" She looked down towards her feet for a moment, then suddenly snapped her fingers as her face lit up. "In fact, I think I just came up with some ideas for the invention competition."

"Good luck, Miu."

"Have fun working on your toys, Kazuichi! Have fun... watching, K I-BO. Voyeur." Miu immediately ran back to her desk, pulled out a pen and paper and began jotting down any and all ideas that came to her head.

Her list read: add camera to K I-BO, eye drop contacts, real-time translation device, automatic sensor camera, keyboard gloves. She tapped the back of her pencil against the corner of her mouth, contemplating any further ideas before shaking her head to herself and placing a large red circle around her favorite one.

Miu ultimately decided on making keyboard gloves, having heard Chihiro complain about her hands hurting when she was programming. Miu wanted to create a pair of compression gloves (to reduce pain) that would allow the user to type without a keyboard, which would let the user type anywhere as long as they had a hard surface. She immediately began drawing blueprints, and she was so enraptured in her creative process she didn't hear the bell ring.

Miu felt a hand on her shoulder and she jumped back, momentarily terrified. Her head quickly whipped in the direction of the person who touched her, and she breathed a sigh of relief when it was just Kazuichi. He had a look of concern on his face, obviously not meaning to spook Miu.

"It's time to go to class. The bell rang."

"Okay, thanks," she said sincerely. She quickly packed up her stuff, making sure to carefully fold her blueprints and place them safely in her backpack. She walked out of the room with a wide smile on her face, ideas filling her head.

The following days were hectic. She designed and redesigned blue prints, started and scrapped prototypes, and sometimes, if Kazuichi didn't have an urgent project to work on, he'd try on the prototypes to see how they worked. No matter how many times he was accidentally zapped by electricity, he always came back to help his friend. K I-BO tended to sit with Miu and talk, filling the silence with stories. Although she would never say so out loud, Miu was eternally grateful for her friends keeping her company. As much as she liked silence while inventing, it was comforting to know her friends were there for her throughout her process, no matter how many mistakes or glitches there were.

"Miu, I really have to work on my own project," Kazuichi said one day.

"Just give me another ten minutes; I'm almost done. And stop squirming." Huffing, she brushed her bangs out of her face with the back of her hand. She paused for a moment to bobby pin her hair out of her face, accidentally getting black grease in her hair, but she was too busy to notice.

"Miu—"

"Shh, I'm working." She cut Kazuichi off.

"You have grease in your hair," he continued anyway.

She just shrugged and continued working. “Okay! Try it.” she said. Kazuichi took a deep breath, waiting to get shocked as he placed his hands on the table and moved his hands as if he were typing on a keyboard. Miu watched as the letters appeared on her screen.

“It’s working!” She cheered. But as soon as she let out a laugh of excitement, Kazuichi jumped back with a quick shout of an “ow”.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I was shocked again.”

She tapped her finger against her chin, took the gloves off Kazuichi, and waved her hand in a dismissive manner. Kazuichi just rolled his eyes and went back to his own project. Miu looked over the gloves, analyzing it for any mistakes. She quickly went back to her blue prints and began redrawing again.

She pulled all nighter after all nighter, trying her best to perfect her newest invention, but there always seemed to be something wrong. She couldn’t help but grow frustrated, both from her project and also from lack of sleep.

Miu walked into the school building, Kazuichi not too far away, talking to one of his classmates. When he turned around and saw Miu changing her shoes, he quickly approached her and handed her a cup.

“What’s this?” she said, hesitantly taking it from Kazuichi’s hands.

“Coffee. You seem really tired all the time, so I thought I’d bring it to you.

“Oh. Thanks. What, are you hitting on me now?”

“Not at all, just trying to be a helpful friend.” A small smile spread across Miu’s face at those words.

After that day, Kazuichi would meet her every morning to hand her some coffee in an attempt to keep her from falling asleep in class. Miu was incredibly grateful for her friend, but she’d never say so out loud.

Eventually, after working on her project non stop for who knows how many days, she handed them to Kazuichi to try for a final time before the competition. She watched as he typed on his desk without a keyboard, and the letters appeared on her screen. She waited to hear a gasp of pain, but nothing happened.

“They worked! I knew they worked! I’m such a genius!” Miu jumped up and down with excitement. Kazuichi extended his hand in a high five, and Miu accepted the gesture.

“Thanks for being my guinea pig, Kazuichi,” she said with a smirk. Kazuichi just shrugged with a smile.

The next day was the invention fair and Miu could feel nervousness churning in her stomach as she got ready. Her heart was beating in her chest so fast and hard she couldn’t help but wonder if it would break her ribs.

Once she arrived at the fair, she quickly set up her booth, displaying progress photos he had taken and the various blueprints she had made. She waited for the judges to come to her table, and as they grew closer, her anxiety somehow got worse. Once they were standing in front of her, she put on a shield of fake confidence and began to speak. “My invention is the keyboard gloves. I have a friend who is a programmer, and her hands tend to cramp up when she’s been working for a while. So I decided to create compression style gloves that allow the user to type on any surface without a keyboard...” As she spoke her confidence grew in her project as she watched the judges nod along to her explanation.

After they left she couldn’t help but congratulate herself in her mind, excited for what was to come and proud of herself for completing her project.

SCIENCE FAIR

Shortie Squad's Stupendous Show!

Psychiccupid {Collab with Catriona}

A flash of lightning lit up the dark room as the rest of the members of the magic club circled Himiko. She didn't look scared, though, more tired and irritated.

Dramatically, the leader stepped forward, looming over her as she sat, arms crossed in the chair.

"Miss Yumeno. You have insulted this club by insisting that you possess magic powers. How do you plead?"

She started tapping her foot in the air, clearly irate. "Guilty! My magic is real!" A small fist pounded into her bouncing knee, and her scowl deepened more and more.

Weeks of being called a liar had led up to this moment — where she was being confronted by the club to either prove herself, or get kicked out permanently. She already knew why this intervention was happening, but that didn't change her cranky mood.

Before any of them could explain it *again*, Himiko pushed herself off the chair and stood proudly. Shouting, "What do I have to do to prove it!?" Were the multitude of magical feats she had shown them previously not enough for them? *Jerks*.

The leader hummed and hawed, asking some other members what they should all do, and the group turned back to her with a unanimous decision.

"You have three months to produce an entire magic show on your own. You will not get any help from the club other than the venue itself. Should you prove yourself, you will take over as leader — and failure to convince us is instant termination."

Fine. She could accept those terms. Shaking the leader's hand, she sent as much magical energy through it as she could.

Now, she just needed to figure out people who would work alongside her. Tenko wouldn't be much help. She would make a fine assistant, but wouldn't bring forth her own ideas. On the other hand, Angie could create a beautiful set, but would take the project over for herself most likely. So no-go on those two.

Ugh. She'd have to go looking through the school handbook.

But, upon opening its pages and scouring its contents, two people in particular stuck out to her.

Chihiro Fujisaki was part of the Technological Advancements Club.

They were known for their timid nature and willingness to help others. Suddenly, Himiko envisioned her show with projections and programs making things automatic. Contraptions that she would imbue with magic!

The next was Hiyoko Saionji. Which was a peculiar choice. She was part of the school's dance committee, but made a name for herself insulting many of the various dance styles that the other members tried to bring up or suggest. If she wasn't the best one in there, her attitude surely would've kicked her out. Someone like that would love being the center of attention while also being able to teach elegant movement, right? Or maybe they could give just performing advice in general.

Plus, both people happened to be around her height...

They were the perfect candidates.

Asking Chihrio wouldn't be a problem, as the chances of them turning the offer down were slim to none. But Himiko knew she needed leverage for Hiyoko and channeled her inner magic to find the answer. Her power successfully led her to the large, proud trophy case in the hallway that displayed the many dance trophies with the name Saionji on it. Yes, yes, offering her the role of the assistant to just be a cute face on stage without having to do too much work would absolutely entice the blonde.

"And why exactly should we be listening to you, Tomato-head?" Hiyoko whined, sitting on the gymnasium floor. "Do you even know anything about performing? About stage presence!? Have you ever even *done* a magic show before!?"

The truth was that, no, the club had never let her do something of this

caliber, but she'd done plenty of street performances and small self-made hallway assemblies with Tenko and Angie's help before.

However, before she could pipe up there was a soft, "O-oh, I definitely have never participated in a show before but — I'm really interested to learn," from the programmer that helped her not snap back at the dancer's accusation.

So, Himiko puffed herself up, standing tall before her two future workerbees, and placed her hands on her hips. "A real magician does not need to know these things ahead of time. She just needs to use ther mana wisely, and it will be a success! Besides..." Himiko then pointed right at Hiyoko's face, watching in delight as Chihiro followed the movement with their eyes perfectly.

"...as the tallest one here, I automatically get to be in charge!" Proud steam exhaled out of her nose, and a smile crept up onto her lips.

She watched as Hiyoko's mouth *dropped* in exasperation before she too stood up and pointed. "Huh!? What!? Are you pulling my leg? I'm the oldest! So I get to be in charge!" Her foot stomped down loudly, and Himiko could've sworn she felt the vibrations travel from the floor to her spine.

In a slight panic, Chihiro got in between both of them. "Hey, hey! Um, I don't think we should be fighting like this... especially at our first meeting! I-I think that Hiyoko should be in charge of blocking and dialogue a-and Himiko can choose what acts we do in what order." With the altercation handled, the programmer relaxed as they kept talking. "Doesn't that seem fair? I'm... I'm really excited to test myself with this! I want it to be a success."

Heated electricity sparked between the two girls as they looked at each other. Himiko couldn't help but feel elated at the fact that she had to look *down* at Hiyoko, but was ultimately shocked when the other rolled her eyes first to break the impromptu staring contest.

"Hmph. Well, you're lucky I'm really interested in performing this. Otherwise I'd leave you to rot. You get me that act list — and I'll get you a show. Aye, Cyber Geek," she snapped her fingers once, and hazel eyes lit up fearfully at attention. "I think we can wear all white costumes and you can project clothes for each act, right? Some computer sci-fi nonsense?" Despite the mean tone, Hiyoko definitely looked excited at the prospect. It made Himiko equally as excited, turning her focus towards Chihiro while she bounced in place.

Faltering a little under their stares, the programmer took a step back and avoided meeting their eyes. "A-ah, y-yeah! I could definitely do that no problem. But you'd have to be extra sure to hit your points on stage, or the clothing won't match up... It would sincerely be easier on both of you if we didn't do tha—"

"Wow! So Chihiro has some magic of their own too!" The mage cried out, red eyes sparkling in absolute delight. "It's perfect. Maybe my assistant isn't so bad after all!" She couldn't help twirling a little in place. Everything really seemed to be falling into place, and she'd show those magic club monkeys that she was all-mighty and powerful beyond their wildest dreams!

For the rest of the afternoon, the three planned and brainstormed; Giggling, laughing, and chatting over blueprints and ideas. Before they even realized it, it was time to leave, but they couldn't keep the smiles and elated lilts out of their voices as they said goodbye and arranged to meet up the next day.

Weeks went by where every day was a fun day of prepping. Sometimes, Himiko and Hiyoko would still get into arguments where Chihiro had to mediate them — but for the most part, this particular combination of people worked strangely well.

Once the set list had been finalized, Himiko kept practicing her magic over and over, using Chihiro as a test for their entertainment value (and plausibility) until she was satisfied. From there, Hiyoko took over, plotting their exact blocking, movement, lines, and more. Being the assistant, she was really reliant on Himiko, but it also gave her a chance to direct. Even if she wouldn't admit it herself, Himiko could tell that she liked having that kind of power, and never complained, because she was dang good at it.

Throughout the rehearsal process, Chihiro had been working tirelessly on the special effects with Alter Ego. And each time a trick was successfully pulled off, it was always relieving to hear the little computer program pipe up in awe. Their outfits looked amazing, the scenery looked spectacular (they did end up going to Angie for that, which she agreed if only because her god told her to forgive Himiko for not inviting her in the beginning), and the dialogue memorization improved steadily.

Truly, everything was coming together. The night before the show was the absolute most fun: hanging up the streamers and setting up the devices for the next day. They also played tricks on each other, Hiyoko getting a few (too many) good scares on Chihiro, and Himiko paying her back by popping out of the saw box — making her squeal. When it was all

done, they looked at their work with pride, and knew that nothing would get in their way tomorrow. They had this. They were ready for this.

That is, until a few minutes before curtain — and two of the three found themselves shaking in nerves.

"You've *got* to be kidding me." Hiyoko spat incredulously at them, looking at the two anxious figures fidgeting side by side, holding hands in solidarity. "We've practiced this a HUNDRED times; you can't be serious?"

Still, even through the fear, Chihiro managed to mumble, "I-I'm very, very serious. I can't move my legs..." To which Himiko nodded many times before Hiyoko rolled her eyes and walked forward to give them both a quick hug.

The two absolutely froze at the weird display of affection from... Hiyoko Saionji... and, yet, found their nerves completely stilled. "I-I have some magic in me too, y'know! And we're gonna prove those big fake wannabee voodoo dolls how talented my lil sis is!" She patted the mage on the head, then stuck her tongue out, sneering at her. "Otherwise she's kicked out of the club forever! Stinks to be you!"

And, *oh*, how that absolutely worked; the programmer giggled as Himiko found herself lit ablaze in passion. She walked her way onto the stage at go-time, bowing for the audience and announcing the show like she'd rehearsed many, many times.

In a matter of minutes, the audience was completely awed.

From backstage, Alter Ego worked the lights, sound, and projections while Chihiro played props stagehand, grabbing the two girls everything

they needed. They would give the commands for the program to change outfits, open trap doors, and the once even appeared on stage during the disappearing assistant trick — showing up in the box instead, only for Hiyoko to come out of Himiko's witch hat. All made possible through some trick-of-the-eye special effects.

Each trick, the audience was pulled more and more in. The magic club's participants in particular were all front row hooting and hollering with max delight. And it all led up to... the grand finale!

Hiyoko found herself laying in a box, ready to be sawed in half, winking at the audience and playing along — pretending like Himiko had done the trick wrong — injuring her and sawing her completely in two. There were gasps, panic, as blood came dripping from the box onto the stage...

Only for the red-headed mage to make a big, big speech, casting a spell to revive the dead. Miraculously, Hiyoko popped out, completely fine in one piece, now sporting a matching red ball gown to Himiko's new, red tux. The two walked hand-in-hand up to the front of the stage and performed a coordinated little twirl before bowing. They then called Chihiro out, programmed to be wearing a combination of their two outfits, and the three bowed together before the curtain closed on a marvelous performance.

The only sound filling their beating hearts being the thunderous applause that echoed throughout the entire stage.

Almost immediately after the show ended, the club came looking for Himiko, finding her in her dressing room with her two co-hosts. And they didn't even hesitate to offer her the leadership position that she'd been promised only a few weeks prior. Instead of accepting, however, she just looked at all of them with a blank face, taking in their desperation and amazed smiles — and could see right through them all that they still didn't trust in her magic.

Luckily, her two new friends had learned enough to have her back before she could even respond. "Sorry losers~ Himiko isn't taking any calls right now. You'll have to get back with her during business hours. She's out getting ice cream right now," Hiyoko cooed as she grabbed the mage's hand and ran out the door giggling.

Chihiro looked at all the eyes boring into them, fidgeted in place, and whispered, "She — she really is magic! I believe in her!" Before running out to follow them, leaving that 'big fake wannabee voodoo doll' group to clean up the stage themselves (as Hiyoko had sneakily written them down as the responsible party for the show during setup).

After their great escape, the three of them found themselves next door at a small frozen yogurt place — tapping their cups together as a toast before cheering, "To the Shortie Squad's Stupendous Show," in absolute relief and glee!

kaiiste

→ Cheer Squad sticker

→ Taka polaroid

Designs by Artist-squared

→ Detention polaroid

→ Chiaki + Kyoko charm

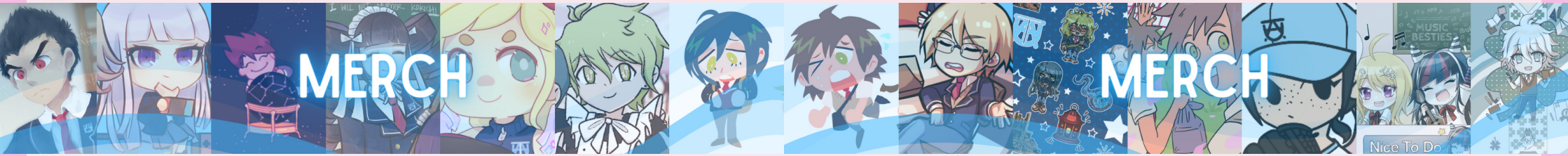
Designs by Krypt

→ Maid Cafe polaroid

Design by Lionfjsh

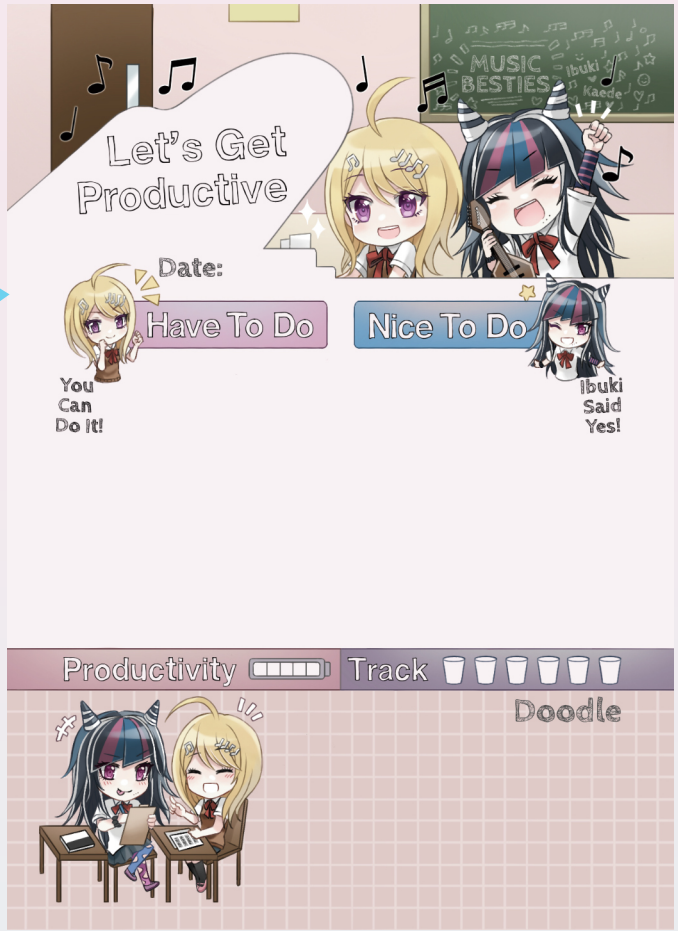
→ Literature Club charm

Design by Knightskite



→ Music Besties Notepad

Design by Carraimel



→ Observatory Washi Tape

Design by Catriona

→ Gonta + Kiyo Bookmark

→ Karaoke Lanyard

Designs by EliTanDark

→ Stretch Goal #3
(Omamori/Charm)

Design by Carraimel

→ Stretch Goal #2
(Enamel Pin/Sticker)

Design by Lionfjsh

→ Early Bird Stickers
(Hajime + Makoto Stickers)

→ Stretch Goal #1
(Kaede + Shuichi Stickers)

→ Stretch Goal #4
(Wall Scroll)

Designs by Wilddaggers

YEAR 1

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LONERY W

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w_lonery
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YEAR 2

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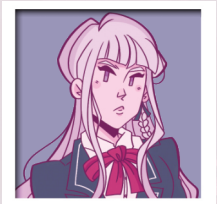

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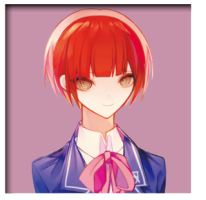

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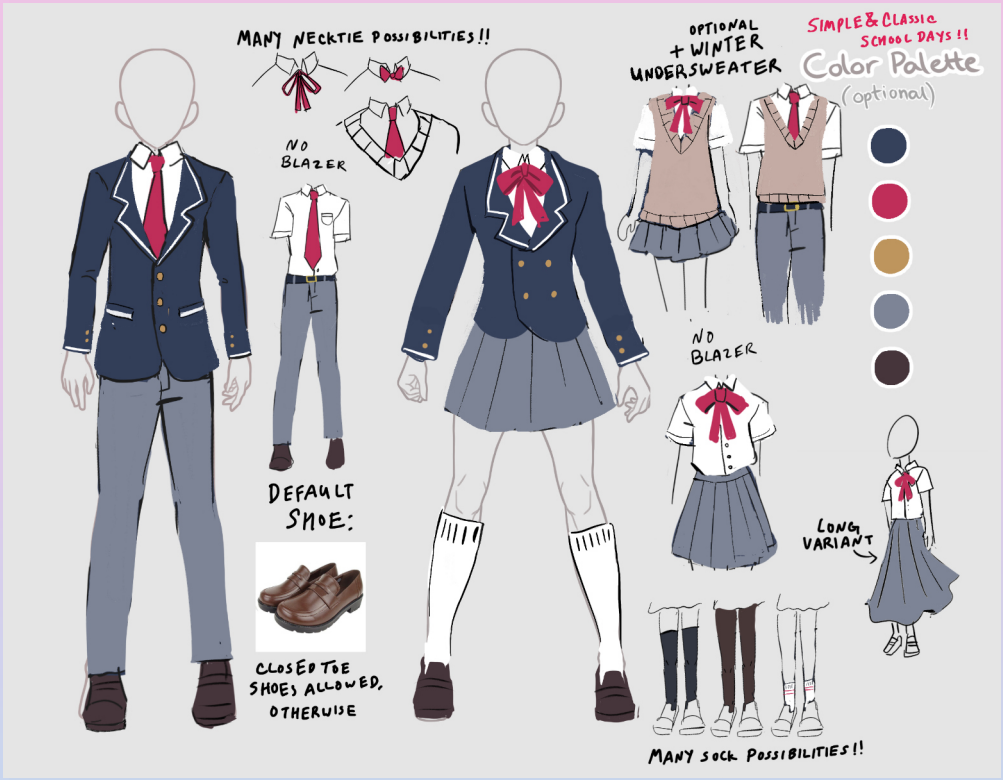
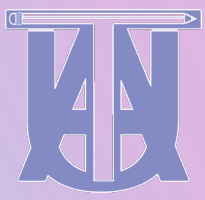
CONCEPT DESIGN

UNIFORM DESIGN: CELCHUNO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